Shelf Life
EALES • McINTEE • MIDDLETON

DEUS CONTINUITAS GRATUITAE

CRAIG PAUL ALEXANDER HINTON

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Preface

'Truth be told, I didn't know Craig that well. Always wanted to meet him, I think we'd have had a good old laugh together, and a bit of a bitch too.' ***– Russell T Davies***

To those who knew him, and to many who wanted to know him, Craig Hinton was the fan's fan. Unashamedly enthusiastic and encyclopaedic in his knowledge of his favourite TV show, Craig never turned his back on *Doctor Who* fandom, progressing from Coordinator for the Doctor Who Appreciation Society to reviewer for *Doctor Who Magazine*'s Shelf Life column, to author of countless short-stories and five *Doctor Who* spin-off novels: *The Crystal Bucephalus*, *Millennial Rites*, *GodEngine*, *The Quantum Archangel* and *Synthespians*™.

He had a wide circle of friends with whom he would fall out and make up with on a regular basis, much like a character from his beloved soap operas, whose convoluted plots and characters were lovingly reflected in many of his works.

Craig loved language, and aspect of Craig's signature style was his eloquent and often intricate weaving of past references from books, comics and television into his stories. He christened the overt use of continuity references 'fanwank', a term that has passed into common use not just among *Doctor Who* fans, but into all corners of science fiction fandom.

Well known as warm and welcoming both at conventions and on the internet, Craig offered help and support to many aspiring writers and was often the most vociferous defender of the underdog, urging fan writers to never give up on their dreams.

Craig had other strings to his bow, working in computing and publishing before settling into a career as a maths teacher shortly before his tragic death at the age of 42 on December 3rd 2006.

At the time of his death Craig was working on a number of projects which included at least one spin-off project, an audio play and the reworking his unpublished novel, *Time's Champion*, which was to have been the sixth Doctor's final adventure.

Shelf Life is dedicated to Craig's memory, and contains contributions from friends and fans alike.

Jay, David and Adrian

Wish You Were Here – A Memorial

I am being haunted by Craig Hinton.

I don't mean haunted in the 'wake up and find him standing at the end of my bed' sense. That would be scary and psychologically rather disturbing. No, I mean in the 'I keep seeing things that remind me of him' sense. For instance, there's a station in Hampshire called Hinton Admiral. I keep seeing it listed on the travel indicators at Waterloo Station when I'm commuting home, and every time I do my heart misses a beat. There's a bar called The George, near where I work, where Craig and Justin Richards and I used to go drinking on a regular basis, and every time I walk by it I feel sad for those days, long passed and which will never return. I can't go in there any more – the feelings are too strong. (I remember, by the way, that the gents' toilets in The George had the urinals attached to the black-tiled wall in a kind of octagonal shape, and when you walked in you found yourself standing in the centre. When Craig needed the toilet he used to say that he was going to confront the High Council of the Time Lords). And watching the scene in *The Runaway Bride* when the TARDIS is chasing the black cab along the motorway I found myself thinking that Craig would be shouting 'Oh, this is just preposterous!' over the sheer over-the-top-ness of it all. And then I remembered, and my heart missed another beat.

I loved Craig. As a fully paid-up heterosexual with a wife and small child, I have no problems in admitting that. He was like a brother to me: a wayward younger brother who kept getting into trouble and who kept needing to be rescued. There were times when we wouldn't talk for months at a time, but then when we started again it was as if we were just picking up half-way through a conversation. There were times when it felt like we were drifting further apart, but our friendship went back twenty-odd (and twenty odd) years, and we knew that we would never drift so far away that we couldn't see each other.

I'm remembering now a time when we were talking on the phone, me in London and him in Portsmouth. The line was getting worse and worse, and at one point I said, 'Craig, you're drifting away.'

'Don't worry,' he said, sounding puzzled, 'we'll always be friends.'

I have a lot of memories like that.

I recall him and me dancing on a table in a bar at the University of Warwick. It was the President's Ball, and Divine (a burly female impersonator) was on stage singing along to a backing track. I suddenly decided I needed to go to the toilet, so I jumped off the table. Without my counterbalancing weight, the entire thing tipped over, sending Craig tumbling into the crowd. Smiling as he went.

I recall when I lost my virginity I went round to see him the next morning, because it was important to me that he had to know. It had been a subject of some discussion for years before. We even had a special song that we intended to play when we each lost our virginity, and he went straight to the cassette player and put it on. (It was Kiki Dee singing *Amoureuse*, if you're interested. It contains the partial line 'When I am far away, I feel the rainfall of another planet', and Craig and I intended one day co-writing a story with the title Rainfall on Another Planet).

I recall going down to Portsmouth to stay with Craig for the weekend, along with the girl I was then living with (we're now married). Craig was depressed about the failure of some love affair, and while we were staying – in fact, while we were actually eating dinner – he tried to slash his wrists in the bathroom, then had second thoughts and tried to cover it all up. I still think of that as the single rudest thing a host can do while he has guests, and yet strangely it's something that never gets mentioned in books on good manners.

I recall a time in London when he complained that we always ended up going to heterosexual bars to drink, and just once he'd like to be able to relax over a pint with me in a gay bar. My protests that we didn't go to heterosexual bars, just bars, cut no ice, and we ended up in a place in Kings Cross where, the moment I walked in, every male in the place (and that was everyone in the place) briefly eyed me up and then looked away. I've never forgotten that, not because I felt particularly threatened or flattered, but because ever since then I have been aware of what, in today's society, women go through every time they walk into any bar. Well, except that one, obviously.

And I recall our shared love of pompous rock-god Jim Steinman, the man behind hits for Meat Loaf and Bonnie Tyler, and I recall also the fact that during Craig's funeral service we all walked away from the coffin, placing white flowers on it as we went, to the strains of *Total Eclipse of the Heart*. That was his anthem, and we cried. We all cried.

Craig always wanted to be a writer. Not because of the fame and the glory (there pretty much isn't any) or because of the pay (ditto) but because, at heart, he was a storyteller. When we were at university, and in the years after we left, he would write fan fiction in his copperplate handwriting using a black fountain pen. I particularly remember a story in which the Doctor discovers that Davros has been implanting Dalek embryos in prostitutes in 19th Century London, and has to become Jack the Ripper in order to prevent a Dalek takeover. That was Craig all over: it wasn't an easy story to write or to read but it had characterisation, moral ambiguity, shock value and historical context, all within a short space. Which is, by the way, why watching *Doctor Who* these days makes me think he would have liked it.

Doctor Who was always an important part of Craig's life, but there was a parallel strand that we used to call – that he used to call – his 'loony universe'. It was an ongoing

series of stories about a group of mismatched teenagers on a spaceship who travelled the galaxy, setting things right and generally getting into trouble, like a cross between *Harry Potter* and *Blake's 7*. It ran – in his mind, remember – for twenty or more seasons, with changes of cast, cliff-hanger endings and everything. Every few years he used to bring me up to date with what had happened. There was even a cross-over with *Doctor Who* during the 5th Doctor's time, as I recall.

And that's all gone now. The imagination, the crises, the drinking, the suicidal tendencies, the paranoia, the pomposity, the acts of gratuitous kindness… There's a hole in my life now where I didn't even realise there was something that could ever vanish. That hole will always be there. Writing these words helps, and seeing this book will help even more, but the hole will never ever be filled.

Wherever you are, Craig, I miss you.

I miss you.

Andy Lane

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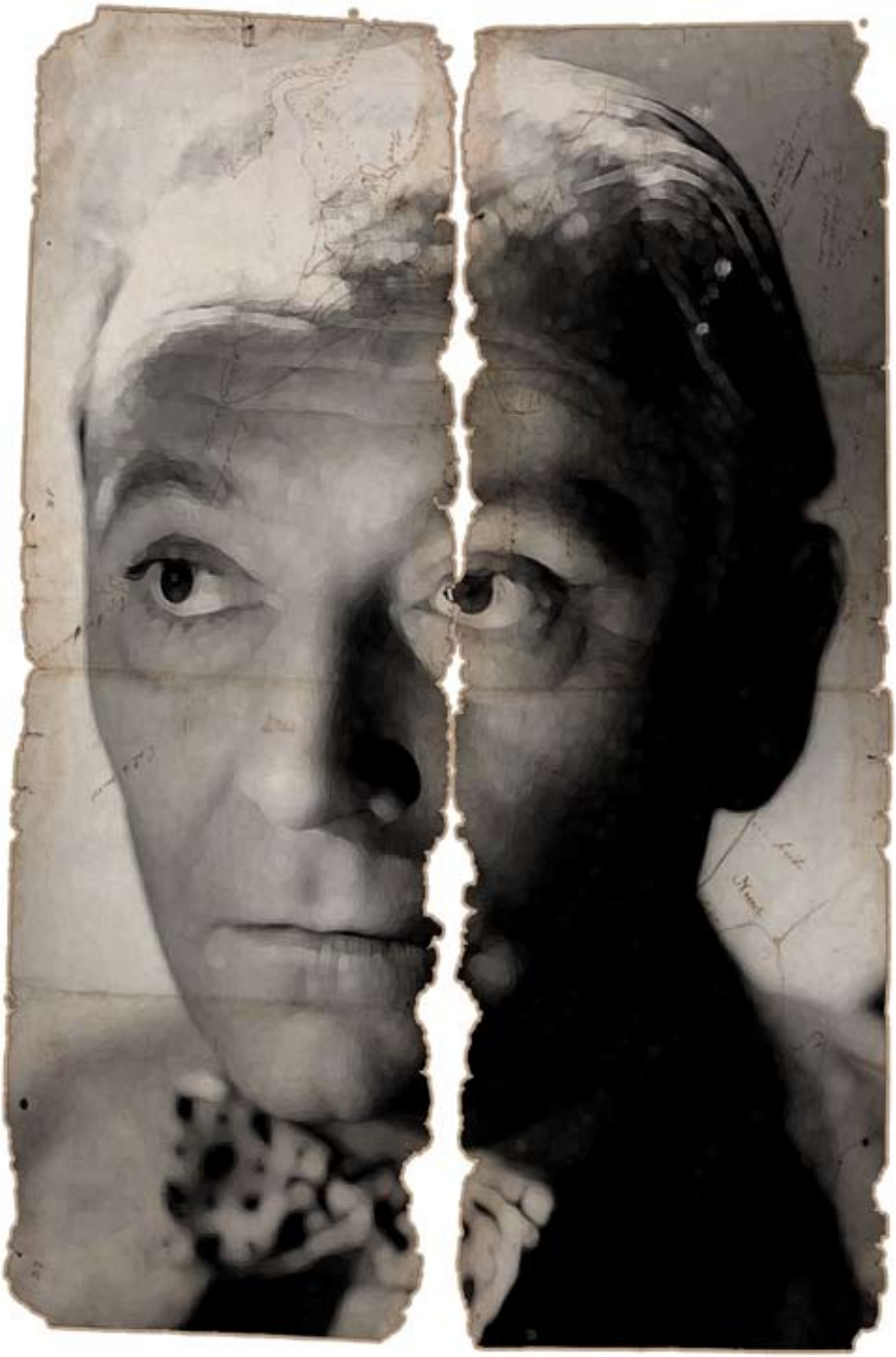

Manuscript Found in an Old Bookcase

Robbie Langton

I can't really claim to have been a friend of Craig's; he was more a friend of my late partner, Adam Richards, with whom he was in contact pretty regularly, mainly via the internet. I did, however, have one delightful telephone conversation with him myself, the memory of which is very dear to me. Adam died – dropped dead suddenly – just as Synthespians™ *had been sent to the printers. Craig rang me to sympathise and to ask if he might include Adam in the list of dedications for the book. From there it extended into a long "put the world to rights" sort of rambling conversation. It was exactly what I needed at that time – I had been spending a lot of efforts helping Adam's friends (younger than me) come to terms with the bereavement; this conversation was for me.*

In due course, the book came out with the promised dedication.

Thin. That was the word. A thin straggle of very thin people creeping slowly up an icy path so narrow it was hard going even in single file. The air was so thin they could hardly breathe it. Their clothing pathetically thin against the desperate cold of the Andean mountains, covered in snow and ice.

At the centre of the column was one figure, a boy about to enter adolescence, whose clothing was significantly more decorous than the rags of the rest. He wore a slim garland around his neck, the meagre flowers fast becoming wilted by the cold. His face was a grim battlefield of determination and terror.

Ahead of him a man – his father – slightly better dressed than the others and clutching a wooden box wrapped in a decorated shawl to his bosom. His face was set solid with agonised resolve. Behind the boy, a woman wept quietly – his mother. She had been howling with grief when the air was thicker and now the tears were frozen to her cheeks. Ahead of the column was an old man with a stick – apparently leading the way, though his glances all around indicated that he was not too familiar with it.

The rest of the Indians moved in silence – nothing showing on their features but despair. Their bodies were bone-weary.

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The valley was dead and the village fast a-dying. This far from civilisation, if a town this distant could be called that, they were left to their own devices, and to their own resources. Or lack of them. Three years with no rain. No water in the well. The thin stream that had

run through their village had dried up. The fields were desiccated – the topsoil blown away. They could see all that frozen water locked high up in the mountain snows, but none of it came their way. They had slain all their animals – holding a few back for the last sacrifices to their gods. They had rationed their grain and made a year's supply last for almost three. Now all that remained was one third of their seed corn, the eating of which would finally commit them to a slow suicide.

They had sent an expedition to the next village to the south, which had returned telling of terrible things. Having consumed everything else, those people had started on each other. The place was deserted, but the evidence was there. That was their own future, unless the gods granted them a miracle.

The old man – the shaman – had spoken and said they should make one last sacrifice: as glorious and as powerful a gesture as they could muster. No animal this time, but the best of their own – the perfect offering. The ceremony was to take place at the most sacred spot of all; the highest of the high places. Only he among them had ever been there, and that had been far back in his youth, during his training for initiation. He dimly remembered the place – high up, beyond the cloud line, hidden among the tops of the mountains.

The chief had offered up his own son as the victim – the strongest and fairest of the youths of the village. They had honoured the lad for a day as best they could. He had eaten a better meal than the rest of them and been dressed in the finest clothes they could muster. In the dried up bed of the stream they had found a small posy of flowers: their roots must have dug deep down to find some scraps of liquid far below. It was not much, but enough to fashion a makeshift garland for the boy. Then they had set off to meet their dreadful purpose, on whose outcome their fate depended.

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They were reaching the end of their mission. The passage through the cloud layer had been terrible, with freezing water crystals tugging at their skin as the harsh wind whisked their body heat away. Now they were above that, looking down onto a sea of whiteness. The evening sun shone upon them again, bringing no warmth to this land of permanent snow and ice. They could see that their journey was reaching an end, for they were now looking down on some of the lesser peaks. Necessity had driven them upward, but their intentions filled them with horror.

It was almost a surprise when they passed through a wriggle of the path between high, icebound cheeks of rock and found themselves in the curiously flat place with a rock altar at its centre. They knew they had arrived and they knew what they must do.

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The family said their final goodbyes to the boy, who now seemed numb and cold as death already. They laid him on the altar and then bared his chest. The shaman started his lengthy invocation with a quavering voice. He prayed to all the gods they knew: to the wind god; to the fire god; to the panther god…

The headman unbound the box he had carried and laid it down upon the altar. In it were a stone knife and a small bundle of leaves. By rights these should have been ch'acal – a powerful drug – but they had had to make do with any leaves they could find. He wove these together into a loose pad and placed it between the boy's teeth for him to bite down on.

As the final words of the priest's chant bounced back as echoes from the Andean peaks, the headman raised the stone knife high over the boy's chest. The boy closed his eyes and waited for the blow to come. His resignation turned to sudden hope, as he prepared to welcome the death that might just bring the miracle to save his people. He tensed himself, thrusting his chest upwards, and waited…

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He was barely aware of the sudden shouting and commotion that arose about him.

From out of what was clearly a solid wall of ice-covered rock, a strange figure appeared. He looked like a man, but was clearly not of their race. His hair was dark brown, not black, and swept back from his high temples to fall around his shoulders. His face was white and his eyes a steely blue. And his garments, black in the main, were like nothing they had ever seen. His legs were covered with strange tubes, and a strangely long coat came down to well below his waist. Under that another garment gleamed in gold and bright colours. From his shoulders descended the only element in his garb they recognized – a long black cloak.

'Stop!' They could not understand the words that came from his mouth. 'You must desist at once! What you do think you are doing, hmm?'

Then the figure spoke to them in their own language, telling them to end the sacrifice and flee this place. While he spoke, he stood before them in a commanding fashion, grasping the lapels of his coat. At first, the villagers shouted out in surprise and alarm, and then they threw themselves to the ground in awe as they realised this must be one of the gods themselves. Finally, as the figure strode towards them, repeating his shouts and waving his arms about, they gave heed to his words and fled. The headman father dropped his knife and took to his heels, closely followed by the priest, in spite of his age.

It wasn't until their flight was well under way that the boy dared to open his eyes again. The apparition and changed circumstance were too much for him to take in as he remained gripped with fear upon the altar. Before his senses had fully returned, the man-god had reached his side and was talking to him, offering him a hand.

'Come along, boy. You've had a narrow escape, hmm? You must be freezing. Let me take you inside and get you warmed up. You look half-starved – some good hot food wouldn't come amiss, I'll be bound.'

When the boy refused to budge, the man-god picked him up and carried him off, walking directly off through the wall itself, into a realm of warmth and light beyond. The boy was a welter of conflicting emotions. As the stress and shock took its toll, in spite of the warm, oxygen filled air that brought relief to his lungs, he gazed in wonder for a few moments at the miracles that surrounded him in this palace of the gods, and then fainted clean away.

I know this because I was that boy…

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I awoke some time later in what I would come to call a bed. It was so warm and soft that I thought I was floating. At home I would sleep on a thin mat on the packed earth floor, covered only by a homespun blanket.

The room was in darkness, so I felt as if I was floating in a void. While I could not remember the actual event of my death, I was convinced that I had passed over into the spirit world, and that the strange man-god must have eased my passing. I hoped that my death had brought the rewards my people so desperately needed.

Then the room filled with a magic light – there was not a single flame in sight, but it was so brilliant that it hurt my eyes. The god entered carrying a bowl with him. There was an implement of bright metal in his other hand. The thought that he was come to drink my blood filled with new dread. Now that I could see him clearly, I thought that I knew who he was. He had a somewhat hooked nose, like the beak of a condor, and his high, prominent cheekbones cast a dark shadow, like the bands of darkness across the cheeks of the condor god in the only depiction I had ever seen of him.

Now I knew I was on the cloud-altar of the condor god. That explained the fluffy whiteness that enclosed and supported me. He would take me as a new sacrifice. The bowl was for my beating heart. I knew that I should thrust out my bosom and be proud for the honour he was doing me, but instead I am ashamed to say that I clutched at my chest in blind panic.

'Awake, are we? Hmm?' the god spoke. 'About time too, my boy.' Then he gave a

little gleeful chuckle, which sounded more to my ears like a cackle and did nothing to dispel my abject terror. When he proceeded to push the bowl towards me, I could see that it was full of what looked like hot, steaming blood.

My anguish knew no bounds, but… why should he come to take my sacrifice with the bowl already filled with blood?

I flung myself onto the floor at his feet, crying out to him to take my heart, but begging him to spare my people and to help them in their dire distress.

'Oh no, you silly fellow,' said the god. 'I have no intention of doing anything like that. Don't you understand? Hmm? I've just saved you. Sit up now – sit on the bed and get some of this hot soup inside you. I've no idea what kind of food you people eat, but most people seem to like tomato.'

He thrust the bowl into my hands and gave me the metal implement, which turned out to be a spoon of very marvellous construction – so unlike the clumsy wooden spoons I was used to. He motioned for me to eat the liquid, which turned out to be most wonderful ambrosia.

'That's it, my boy. Eat it all up. I'll come back in a little while and we'll see if we can find something for you to wear.'

It turned out that I had been asleep for many hours. My swoon had turned into deepest slumber and he had carried me into a bedroom where he had left me to recover. While I had failed to sleep at all during the last night of my earthly existence, transfixed as I had been by the horrors of my immediate future, the long climb had taken less out of me than most of my companions. The stress and anxiety, however, had nearly finished me. It was no wonder that I had slept so long and so deeply that I had no recollection of him picking me up and putting me to bed. And now I was indeed ravenously hungry. When the steaming liquid had cooled enough, I gave up manoeuvring the unfamiliar spoon and drank directly from the bowl itself. Thus I had finished the meal and had time to assess my surroundings before the god returned.

Though I now know the room to have been pretty small and sparse in real terms, it seemed at the time to be most wondrous and palatial. The walls were, I assumed, of a very superior adobe, bleached perfectly white and with a pattern of large disks in it. The bed I now understand was a type of sailor's heavy weather cabin bunk – with raised walls around all but a section in the middle. I had been put into this as there was less chance of my falling out in my sleep. It was set against two walls, with the head in the corner. Beyond it on the long wall was a sort of dressing table, I suppose: a level surface with a kneehole and drawers, cupboards and shelves beneath. It was nothing special, just plain white plastic, but to me at the time it seemed like something entirely wondrous. I never knew anything could be so smooth and white. There were strange and mysterious implements and containers

upon it, all gleaming exotically.

But it was the mirror fixed above the kneehole section that completely took my breath away. I had never seen anything so magical. I stood before it for a while transfixed at the sight of myself, fascinated and at the same time terrified. When I saw the image move in it – for I had not initially perceived it to be me, never before having seen myself except imperfectly in water – I fled from its presence and flung myself to the floor. When I plucked up enough courage to raise myself up, and saw yet again the animated figure moving within it, I stood for a moment, daring it to attack me, until my spirit left me and I fled in panic, seeking the hole in the wall through which the condor god had disappeared. But I knew nothing of doors – our huts had hide curtains over their doorways – and even less of locks and door catches. It seemed the god has sealed the wall up behind himself. I looked back at the figure in the mirror and a greater wave of panic hit me. I must have fallen against the door handle, because the door panel slid back and I fell out into the space beyond.

This was, well… a corridor. Empty, more or less, except for one object, which entranced me. I recognized as a totem of great power straight away for no-one would have used such skill to produce a mundane object. Wood had been bent and contorted into an aerial fantasy of horns and diadems. Not directly representational of a human figure, but clearly alluding to that shape. It made the wooden totems in the shrine at the edge of our village look like crudely hacked trunks of wood. From its elegantly twisted feet, up its slender body to its miraculously conceived head of curving shapes, it pervaded an immediate majesty. I threw myself down before it and began chanting.

And thus it was that the Doctor, when he came out of the TARDIS console room to check on my progress, was confronted by the sight of me worshipping a hat stand!

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A little later, now dressed in an assortment of warm garments, some of which nearly fitted me, the Doctor took me into the console room and sat me down in a chair. The sight of what was clearly an altar of unbelievable complexity complete with a magically glowing deity at its centre had me confused. The figure before me denied that he was a god. I did not really believe this – I was convinced that I was being tested in some way. On the other hand, the glowing presence in the centre of the room could well be the god itself, and this man would then be his high priest or his servant. Certainly, when the man approached the altar around the glowing entity, he seemed to caress the surface of it, examining it carefully and touching it with great reverence.

Then he directed my attention to a portion of the wall of the room, which had

me totally confused again. Through it I could see the holy high place to which I had been brought for sacrifice. I could see the stone altar on which I had been laid. It was a window, I knew – we had holes in our hut walls to let the light in. But… if I was looking at the high place through a window, then the room in which I was sitting would have to be way up in the air and canted over in such a way that I would be falling out of my chair.

Then the Doctor did something, and the room rushed down towards the rock altar – I gripped my chair's arms, fearing that I would fall out of it, but yet I felt no motion whatsoever. Another click from the Doctor, and the view rushed forward yet again. I could see the knife, the box and the cloth that had wrapped them.

'We'd better retrieve those,' said the Doctor. 'I dare say they are yours now, and may be the only possessions you have, my boy. Hmm? I've got to go outside to check some final adjustments anyway. You can come with me.'

So saying, he led me towards and through the doors at the edge of the room – I had come somewhat to terms with doors by now. One moment I was standing in the doorway and the next I was standing on the snow of the high place. I looked back, and there was behind me only the icy rock of the place's walls. There was no doorway, no… nothing.

I would have lost my bowels in sheer terror at that mystery had the Doctor not taken my hand and led me away. We approached the rock altar and he stooped to pick up the stone knife. I screamed inside myself as I thought that I was to be sacrificed at last, but he picked up my father's box and placed the knife inside it, wrapping the whole in the sacred shawl. My heartbeat was returning to normal as he smiled and handed the parcel to me.

Then the Doctor turned around and looked back to where we had magically appeared in this hallowed place. His voice was gleeful as he said, 'It's working very well, isn't it, my boy? The old girl's completely hidden. Quite as it should be. My repairs have been successful.'

He stood there for some moments, admiring whatever it was he was admiring. I had no idea what was going on, but stood there as well, looking in the same direction.

Then it all changed.

A section of the rock wall at which we were gazing flickered and flashed and turned into, well, I am not sure even now what it was it turned into. Whatever it was, it was not something you expected to see at the top of a mountain.

'Oh dear!' muttered the Doctor. 'Not quite as well as I had hoped. I think I should have used a thicker wire. Oh well, no point in waiting to see what else it will turn into. We'd better get on with it. It's rather too cool out here, anyway. I wonder if the temperature is affecting the circuitry.'

Then he led me towards, and then, further to my astonishment, *through* this strange vision – some sort of building fabric in purple and gold. We were back inside the TARDIS once more, and the Doctor immediately involved himself with his apparatus, stooping beneath the sill of the central console and removing a panel. He left me to my own devices, which amounted to my standing there with my mouth open.

'I wish I had paid more attention in the classes on the chameleon unit,' he said, as if I would make something of his words. 'I was far more interested in the time-circuitry, and I never thought I would ever have to make field repairs on a model as old as this anyway. It really needs a more sensitive neutron flow balancer than I have at my disposal, and I think the left hand lecto-discriminator board may be partially burnt out. Not sure I could ever rebuild that – it would need a supply of deutero-gallifrenium, and I won't be getting my hands on any more of that. Yes, yes, I can see what it is. I'll have to route it all through the right hand board and hope it will stand the strain.'

At first I was just standing. Then I was recovered enough to start thinking again. He was on his knees, obviously praying in some obscure way to the central idol. So he must be the acolyte and not the god himself, unless he was a lesser god and praying to some higher god. Then it struck me that I should perhaps join him in prayer. I knelt down beside him and lowered my gaze to the floor. I was still very tired, and to my shame I drifted off into the edge of sleep.

The Doctor stood abruptly, rousing me again. 'I think that may well work now,' he said to himself, 'so we'll go outside again and see what we will see, shall we? Where are you, child? Oh! Why are you down there, my boy, Hmm?'

'Come along, come along, young fellow,' he said, not waiting for me. He strode towards the door. 'Don't want you getting into mischief while I'm outside, do we?'

The thought that I might commit mischief in my ignorance practically paralysed me with horror once more. Foul and most terrible would be the punishment, I knew! Then I managed to move enough to obey him.

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Outside, the strange object was once more swallowed up by the normal rock and ice walls of the holy place. This seemed to please the Doctor. He emitted a series of gleeful sounds, a cross between a 'hmm' and a 'yip'. Then he dragged me through the ice back inside the TARDIS saying, 'Let's see what happens in a different location, shall we?'

There then followed a lightning tour of seven different locations, not all of which I am able to identify. Among them were Paris – I recognise the memory of the Eiffel Tower – where the TARDIS became one of those advertising kiosk things; Egypt – it became a

small sphinx; London – a blue police box thing. Of the others, except for the last, I have no idea where or when they were. The final location was a pine forest somewhere. When we stepped outside to examine the latest transmogrification there, I had a little more time to catch my breath. The Doctor had been in a blue haze of ecstasy up until this point. This time he covered my eyes as he dragged me out to see.

'There,' he said gleefully. 'Can you see which tree the TARDIS is?'

I turned round and looked.

'Yes, sir,' I said. 'It's that one there.'

I'm afraid it was rather obvious, for although his travelling machine had indeed become a tree, it stood out rather from the rest by virtue of the trunk being offset by a good foot from the branches above it and the roots below it.

'Oh, dear me, no,' he said in a woebegone tone. 'No – that is not as it should be, is it, my boy, hmm? We'll have to see about that.'

And then I had some respite as he took us back into the console room and began to make yet more adjustments. I was not part of his frequent expeditions to check the results now. I think he was waiting to use me again as a spotter when he had things perfected. At each tweak and test cycle his frustration and dismay mounted. He would re-enter tutting and scratching his head.

Finally he admitted temporary defeat. 'I don't think I am ever going to get it right until I have some better tools to work with, my boy,' he said. 'I used to have a sonic screwdriver – that would be just the ticket now. Perhaps I could make one. Not sure. Difficult. Useful though. I'll think about it.'

I think then he must have heard my tummy rumbling.

'Bless me,' he said. 'I've been a very bad host. I'm afraid I'm not used to having companions around me. I get very self-involved, you know. It must be ages since you ate, and then it was just a bowl of soup. Let's see what we can find you, eh?'

After a short trip into the inner part of the TARDIS, where I later found the food machine was located, he returned with a larger repast than I could possibly have eaten in several days. There was meat, fish, bread, milk, fruit, vegetables, sweetmeats, cakes, soups and much more that I cannot describe piled on a sort of trolley.

'Tuck in – tuck in,' he said. Then left me to my own devices while he turned back to his recondite manipulations of the circuitry.

There being no seat, I ate standing. Some time later he noticed this and brought a couple of chairs into the console room. I sat in one and continued my attack on the mounds of provisions. Some time later, after he had made several more fruitless expeditions to gauge the results of his endeavours, he settled himself down in the other chair and watched me, taking the odd pinch of food for himself from time to time – like a bird pecking.

I had passed from satisfied to completely full and still I tried to force more down. This was because I did not want to displease the god who had provided it and because months of hunger had made me wary of passing up any opportunity to gorge myself.

Finally, when I could not have managed even half a grape more, I stopped and apologised for not completing the meal further.

'Eat what you like, my boy – there's plenty more, but it's not a competition.' Then he sat for a moment looking at me narrowly. 'You know, I've been rather remiss,' he continued. 'Silly of me not to have asked, but I don't even know your name?'

'It is K'amek, lord,' I stammered.

'Kamek, eh? Hmm…' he said, missing out the ejective consonant at the beginning of the name, which changed the meaning from 'firstling' to 'bucket', but if the great one wished to called me 'bucket' then so be it. 'And I'm not a lord, you know. Well, I suppose, technically, Time Lord, yes, but…' He drifted off into a silent reverie again.

After a decent pause, I ventured, 'How am I to address you, great one?'

'Oh – er – yes – well. Hmm? I know – you can call me Doctor. Yes, that's it – I shall be The Doctor.'

'Yes, lord Doctor, sir. And am I permitted to ask you in which part of heaven you reside?' I was trying to ascertain which god or which god's servant he was.

'Er – well, as it happens I don't really reside anywhere at the moment. But, yes, I do come from a planet around a distant star or two. I'll point it out to you one night. I decided to leave it though. I wanted to explore the galaxy, not become a bureaucrat. I'm afraid to say I rather stole this old girl…' Here he slapped the side of the console. 'She's a bit cranky though, and I set down up in the mountains on this planet to sort some details out. That's when I saw the nonsense going on out there with you and put a stop to it.'

He came from the stars – that meant he was certainly a god, minor or otherwise. I had never heard of a god called 'The Doctor', but I was happy to admit my knowledge of such things was limited. I knew then that I was being tested – would I be able to see his holiness and treat him with the necessary respect? I threw myself at his feet and cried out, 'Forgive me, lord Doctor, for any rudeness I may inadvertently have shown you in not worshipping you as you deserve.'

'Get up, get up, you silly fellow. How many times must I tell you I am not a god, hmm? And I'm just the Doctor, not lord Doctor, er, Kamek, my boy.'

'K'amek,' I corrected him automatically, and shrieked inside at the indiscretion.

'K'amek?' he said. 'Oh, I see – that extra force on the first K is important in your language. What does K'amek mean?'

'Sir Lord, sir Doctor – in our language it means 'first one' – I was my father's first born and was to become the first man in our village eventually.'

'But not if you were dead, K'amek…'

'Yes, sir, lord, sir, Doctor – no.'

'Why were they going to kill, you, hmm?'

'It was my honour, sir, to be sacrificed to the gods in order to save our village, sir Doctor.'

'Save your village, indeed? Save it from what, boy?'

'It had not rained for three years, lord. We had run out of food. We were dying, Doctor. I was to be the perfect sacrifice and to try and intercede with the gods to send us help in our dire need.'

'What a waste! What a waste! A lot of good that would have done. There are no gods, my boy. It would have meant one mouth less to feed, but that is all that can be said for it. A good job I noticed it on the viewer, eh? Saved your bacon, hmmm, K'amek?'

∞

It was settled that I should be educated and that presented some problems in itself. The Doctor felt that I should learn my lessons in England. I had no objections to that – it seemed a decent place to live in most of the various eras in which I had seen it, for it was a favourite haunt of the Doctor. He settled on the late Victorian period: late enough for most of the basic scientific ideas to be in place, but not late enough for a troublesome bureaucracy to want to investigate this darkish skinned young stranger with a middle-aged gentleman for a guardian.

Its meaning, he explained, was that I would have to learn the English language. This amazed me, for on my visits there I had always been able to hold intercourse with the natives without difficulty. He explained to me that this was an artefact of the TARDIS itself, and that I had been speaking to them in my native Indian tongue which it had then converted so that they could comprehend me, with a similar process affecting their utterances in their native English language. Similarly I had assumed that the Doctor spoke my language, in spite of never being able to pronounce my name correctly half the time. It transpired that the TARDIS' intercession had allowed him to converse with me using his own native tongue.

The Doctor was, however, conversant with English well enough to introduce me to that language sufficiently for simple transactions – a process which he achieved after first disabling temporarily the translation mechanism of his ship. He also introduced me to letters and soon I was able to augment his conversational practice by the reading of a variety of books, which he dredged up from the depths of the TARDIS – one, fortunately, being a dictionary.

He arranged with one Mrs Veale, a decent widowed lady from the East End of London, that she should give me lodgings and look after me in his absence. He also arranged for me to be educated at a small school of good reputation nearby which was used to taking on immigrants and late developers in that cosmopolitan area.

It was while he was making these provisions that I acquired my new name. We both agreed that it would be injudicious for me to employ K'amek for the purposes of my education – it being but a single word in a culture, which expected a surname and at least one Christian name, and a word which was certain to be mispronounced, rendering me a humble household item.

It was the custom in those times to derive many personal names from their Bible, which was one of the books he had given me for my reading practice. I had not got very far with it, and much of it had seemed very silly, though I had found a few good stories within it.

'Ah,' I said. 'When you found me I was about to be sacrificed by my father. There is a boy in that book called Isaac saved from the same plight. Would that be a suitable name?'

'Splendid, dear boy,' he beamed. 'And what is more I have an idea for a second forename. There is a character in that book who lived to be a very old man indeed. Though you have only lived for a short time in reality, there is nevertheless a gap of over four thousand years between the day you were born and this day now. I think that probably qualifies you to be a "Methuselah" – eh? Hmm?'

With two forenames settled upon, it was only a matter of translating my real name, K'amek, into a surname meaning much the same in English.

Under my new names I took up my residence with Mrs Veale and started to pursue my education in earnest. The Doctor went away on his travels, returning at increasingly infrequent intervals to check on my progress, which was, he admitted after careful questioning, more than adequate.

I enjoyed living with Mrs Veale greatly. Her husband had been a rag and old bone man who had been killed when his horse had bolted upon being frighted by a steam traction engine in the street. Though it would have been unseemly for her to have carried on his occupation, she had made somewhat of a living by sorting the rags brought in to her by his colleagues in trade. Some garments could be repaired and sold anew. Some wool could be unravelled and sold for re-use. Scraps of the better fabrics, such as silk, could be washed and sold to milliners, who would use them to trim their creations. Some material would be sold to the makers of felt and the poorer remnants to the makers of paper. Quite a lot of the sturdier stuff she would use to make pegged rag mats, at which she was very adept, producing attractive and complex designs, which sold themselves readily. By her

quick eye and her diligence, she had been able to survive and my rent gave her a pleasant security. As a respite from my scholarly endeavours, I was accustomed to assist her in her labours and would from time to time go out on collecting expeditions with her husband's friends.

I enjoyed my time with her very much, came to love her like a mother – for she treated me as the son she had never had. So happy was I, indeed, that I did not really want to leave her when the time came for that to happen. But I had vowed always to be the servant of the Doctor and considered the period of my education merely as a preparation the better to perform those duties. So it was that I resumed my life in his company and also took up again the other part of my vow, which was to persuade him to bring aid and succour to the people of my native village.

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The Doctor, by now looking very much older and with hair turned to white, transported me to many places and times and let me see diverse things: strange and fantastical sights. I will not attempt to describe these to you for you would simply not believe me. His ship travelled through space and through time. Although I could never understand its inner workings, he showed me how to manage the controls so that I could be of assistance to him. We had many adventures, because the Doctor seemed to have a knack for arriving in places when trouble was just about to start. Much of the time he spent repairing and perfecting the mechanisms of his ship, as its functioning was far from reliable. To do this, he would frequently park the machine in the isolated spot from which I was taken, for he valued its solitude.

I tried to persuade him to return to my village at the time of my departure from it and assist my people. Each time he would dismiss the possibility with a wave of his hand and some comment such as, 'No, my boy, that would not be a good idea.' 'We cannot meddle in such things,' he would say. 'Our actions always have consequences, and changing the course of history can be dangerous.' I found it very frustrating. I could not see how there could be any peril in saving a few villagers from a certain and miserable death. He was in many ways a very kind man, yet he refused to help those who had been so very dear to me.

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The Doctor rarely slept. He would go for days without sleep, but occasionally he would have to spend a period recuperating and rebuilding his energies. When this happened, he

would retire to a special room within the vessel and remain in it for many hours – sometimes days. I determined to seize the opportunity presented by one such resting interval, after he had been active for so long time that I knew that he would require a substantial period of recovery.

Using my skills as a navigator, I moved the ship from its mountain eyrie and its current time setting in the late seventeenth century to a position just outside my native village on the night after their attempt to sacrifice me. I had been preparing for this event for some time and had created bags of corn and other comestibles within the food generator of the ship and had concealed these in a variety of locations around it, for there were many rooms, which were never used at all. Under cover of darkness, I removed these bags and piled them up where the villagers would see them in the light of dawn. Finally I connected a large pipe to the generator and set it to produce large quantities of water, which I used to fill up the village well. I would have liked to remain there to see their joy in the morning light, but I knew that they would not recognise me and might well be frightened by my appearance.

Feeling extremely pleased with myself, I then moved the Doctor's ship back to the high place and to the time from which I had taken it. I stepped out of it to enjoy the dawn, which was just about to happen and was spectacular in that location. Well wrapped up in warm clothing against the bitter cold, I sat on the stone altar, as I had often done before, to watch the first pink rays sparkle against the ice covered rock walls.

Reader, as the light strengthened and I could see the changes in that place, I realised the full horror of what I had brought about by my kindly act. The bare ice walls were now lined with the mummified bodies of children, the sacrificial victims of my people's reinforced belief in the efficacy of such procedures. Their faces stared out of the ice at me, frozen in a rictus of anguish and horror at the moment of their terrible deaths. Their eyes were open, as were in many cases their mouths, as if shouting their condemnation of me, their unwitting murderer.

When the Doctor re-emerged from his repose, I confessed my guilt to him and vowed never to travel in the TARDIS further. He was filled with sadness so deep I felt it would break my heart. 'Yes, well, my boy. I did warn you.' That was his only reproach, but my remorse would infect the rest of my life with sorrow.

He returned me to London and to Mrs Veale, and I tried to lose myself in hard work. I built up quite a successful business in her old trade and looked after her until she died. Later, I was fortunate enough to marry a young cousin of hers and bring up a small family. The Doctor would look in occasionally, parking his vehicle in the yard which I had acquired in order to make repairs – for he too could no longer bear the sight of my dead victims up in the mountains. He said that his experiences with me had given him a taste

for having a young travelling companion and that he would investigate the possibility of bringing a juvenile relative of his on board for that purpose.

So I determined that I should record my guilty history as a warning for such a companion, and thus I have set down this account. Reader, be warned: pay heed to the Doctor and his advice, for he is a kind and good man. But do not meddle in the affairs of Time.

Doomsday Minus One

Christer Van

Coming, as I do, from the 'other side of the pond', my contact with Craig was limited to the internet, where we first crossed each other's path in 2005, where we found we shared a mutual love of comicbooks and in particular, of the works of Jack Kirby and his infamous Kirby-Tech™, first seen in the pages of the Fantastic Four.

Craig openly acknowledged the influence that comicbooks had on his writing – he explained that Millennial Rites *was based on the Inferno saga and the Kulan Gath saga from the* X-Men *titles – there was a mention of* Doctor Strange *and* John Constantine *as well (there would also have been a mention of the Endless from* Sandman *had it not vanished at proof-reading stage);* The Quantum Archangel *was an homage to the Phoenix/Dark Phoenix saga, down to the 'hear me now,* X-Men*' line, with the Necron/Phoenix battle from* Excalibur *#50 thrown in for good measure – the idea of all the heavy-hitters turning up at the end of the Millennium War was inspired by* Infinity Gauntlet *#5. It made passing references to Pym particles and to the Shi'ar Empire, and there was a mention of Oa from the pages of* Green Lantern *as well; the idea of everyone getting the universe they want, as well as a lot of the quantum stuff, is from Mark Waid's Julian September saga in* Justice League of America. *And the TITAN Array was supposed to resemble Kirby-Tech™. Oh – and there was a planet Kirbili.*

One of the scenarios that Craig and I subsequently discussed online was 'What if the Doctor met Galactus?'. At the time I was persuading Craig that that should be his next big story. Now, I found myself writing it instead.

For Craig.

Four tumbling objects plummeted downwards through the spiralling blue energy corridor, their trajectories shifting as its sides repelled them. Three of the objects, all of which appeared to be highly lacquered ornamental bedroom wardrobes inlaid with intricately crafted marquetry patterns, were spinning in loose formation in pursuit of the fourth. This last object resembled an even more ornamental garden pagoda, its stacked tiers shimmering with light reflected from the blue and green veins of marbled jade that covered its surface.

Inside the jade pagoda, a white room shuddered.

At its centre the mushroom-shaped control station gave out a loud grating screech as a glass column filled with blue rods and green crystals shook with the strain of the trip. Its reflected light twinkled in the eyes of the ship's pilot, whose hands played

their way across the many switches and levers set into the station like those of a concert pianist. Occasionally he would pause, humming or tutting as he responded to the data that streamed across the screen of a viewer that lay before him. Like his vessel, and those of his pursuers, the pilot was bedecked from head to foot in ornamental kitsch; he wore the rich silk green robes of an imperial Mandarin, garnished with a sash and edging of the yellowest gold.

Across the room, an elfin girl with dark hair and almond shaped eyes clung tightly to a bulky green chair whose arms were mahogany dragons and whose padding was velvet of deepest green. Completing the oriental theme, the girl wore a tight red cheongsam, itself embroidered with golden dragons.

'How long, grandfather?' She asked the pilot, her knuckles whitening as the room lurched. 'How long before we lose them?'

'Eh?' The pilot looked up from his controls. He looked to be an ageing gent in his late fifties or sixties, his long, once-dark hair almost completely whitened by the onset of middle age. 'I don't know my dear, it's been nearly thirty centuries already. Their ships aren't made for that kind of distance, they'll end up stranded.'

'Can't we jump time tracks?'

The old man shook his head before turning back to his switches and levers. 'Those ships are far too primitive to control their landing without a preset destination. Wherever we end up, we need to guide them to safety as well.'

'But they're Time Agents. They have ray guns.' she protested.

'What's a Time Agent compared to a Time Lord, eh?' He smiled smugly, his eyes twinkling back at her as he spoke, tapping at the side of his temple. 'And a Time Brain of course. They're new to time travel. They might have adapted their bodies to withstand the rigours of the vortex, but not the brains. Without the protection we're afforded by the ship's interior their reason will be blasted from existence. When we land they'll just be mindless zombies.'

'That's awful,' said the girl, a look of concern creeping over her face. 'Are you sure?'

'Sure?' He snapped. 'You forget, child, I had the opportunity of examining Mister Findecker's morphogenic extrapolation chamber from the inside. He may have cracked the secret of the double-double helix, but he hasn't got a clue how the Time Lord mind works.'

'I'm sorry.' The girl winced as she thought of the torture device she'd found her grandfather strapped to. If it hadn't been for that handsome Time Agent, he would have been as dead as the friend they were meant to have been visiting. She'd never imagined being Gallifreyan could be so dangerous, yet everywhere they went people seemed to be

trying to steal their secrets.

'That's all right,' he reassured her, 'it shouldn't be…'

With a violent spasm the ship seemed to slam into something, throwing the old man and his granddaughter across the room. This time the furniture – the dragon chair and a number of other recently acquired oriental antiques – tipped and scattered in all directions, colliding with the ship's occupants as they struggled to get a hold of something that wasn't moving.

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Outside, in the blue vortex, the jade pagoda had come to a sudden jarring halt. Behind it, the three oriental cabinets surged forwards, colliding with the same invisible obstacle that had brought their pursuit to a premature conclusion. Unlike the pagoda, the cabinets shattered into a million shards, their tiny fragments sucked away by the time winds that formed the energy spiral through which they had been travelling. As they did so, the jade pagoda started fading out of existence, as if it had never been there.

In open space a throbbing green backlight pulsed behind the marbled walls and stacked roofs of the spinning jade pagoda that appeared from nowhere.

'Grandfather.' It was the girl. Having found her feet she had crossed the room to attend to the prone form of her companion. Sprawled across the floor of the white room, the echo of her worried words soon filled his head, accompanied by the unmistakable throbbing of his injured temple. 'Grandfather, wake up.'

'What…?' He pulled himself up groggily, instinctively reaching up to feel his aching temple before glancing around wildly. 'Where are we?'

His granddaughter turned to the controls, looking down at a tumbler which displayed their place in time. 'The chronometer says the local dateline is 1962,' she turned her eyes towards a second tumbler that revealed their spatial coordinates, 'about a light year from Earth.'

'Hmm,' he scratched his chin, heaving himself to his feet to look over the girl's shoulder. 'That's no good. No good at all. We're about two hundred years too late. What did we hit?'

'Nothing,' she said, pointing to the viewer. 'The time corridor collapsed.'

'What? That's impossible.' Moving the girl aside the old man started turning dials and flicking switches, calling up reports that would analyse their predicament. 'I generated the corridor myself. It wasn't programmed to collapse until we reached 1787. Not unless…' he paused, tearing off a strip of ticker tape and reading what it said '…we ran out of time…'

'How do you…'

'It's rare,' he interrupted, 'but certain creatures can consume raw time. They're supposed to have been banished, but in theory if a Chronovore or a Temperon were to eat its way across a time corridor, the effect would be like flying without air.'

'You can't fly without…'

'Precisely, my dear. We get forced back into real space in the vicinity of the breach.'

'You mean there's a creature out there feeding on history?'

'Or there will be. It depends which side of the breach we've landed on. Let's take a look shall we?'

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Wednesday, July 4th 1962, 1.15pm GMT
L'Organisation Européenne pour la Recherche Nucléaire, Geneva, Switzerland

'The European Organization for Nuclear Research?' The young girl read the signage that revealed their location. 'What's that, grandfather?'

The old man rubbed his chin for a moment, before his eyes widened and his memory spurred his reply. 'It's CERN, the biggest particle physics laboratory on the planet,' he said, clasping his hands together with excitement. 'That's excellent! TARDIS couldn't have brought us to a more appropriate location.'

It was an impressive site, with a two-lane security barrier and a separate one for pedestrian access. Stretching away into both directions, only one entrance, marked 'Entrance B' was visible. To the east, signposted 'Aeroport, Meyrin et St. Genis', the border crossing into France could clearly be seen.

Urging his young ward forwards, the old man presented himself to the guard that manned the pedestrian gate.

'Good day to you, sir,' he said in fluent French. 'We're here for the conference.'

'What conference?' the girl whispered in English. The old man turned, staying her with his had to deter further interruptions.

'Shush, child,' he replied quietly, they always have conferences here. This place will be full of academics and physicists from all over the world.'

The girl mouthed as silent 'oh' as her guardian returned his attention to the guard, who seemed to be asking him for papers of some kind, to which the old man bluffed and blustered, insisting his name would be on *the list*.

'. . and your name, monsieur?'

'Erm, English,' he announced, not entirely decisively. 'Professor… English. Plus one.'

Inspecting one of several clipboards, the guard ran his pen down the list before him. Satisfied he had checked thoroughly, he announced that no such name was listed.

'No, no, no,' the old man insisted, 'that's wrong, there must be. Let me see.'

Before the guard could react he had snatched the board away from him and started perusing the list, his eyebrows occasionally twitching as he recognised some of the names.

'Monsieur!' The guard protested, reaching for the clipboard.

'Yes, yes! There, see.' He pointed to a name that wasn't English. 'That's meant to be me! My colleague Professor Nicholson seems to be listed. I'm meant to be here in his place. They called the changes through three days ago.'

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Wednesday, July 4th 1962, 1.55pm CET
11th Rochester Conference in High Energy Physics, CERN Administration Building

As they joined the delegates filing into the aisles of the main auditorium, the conference itself seemed as impressive as its location. From the state of disarray among the auditorium seats and the buzzing of animated conversation, it was clear they had joined the after-lunch session.

'Four hundred-and-fifty physicists from thirty-nine different countries,' the old man whispered, reading from his conference programme, and look here.' He pointed at the list of speakers in the conference programme as they stepped into one of the descending aisles. 'More than half a dozen Nobel prize winners. Five of them renowned in the field of particle physics! This is fascinating. Shall we stay here or join one of the break-out sessions, eh?'

'Break-out sessions?' The girl was concerned. 'Aren't we supposed to be warning them about the . . . ?'

'Yes, yes,' he replied, 'all in good time, my dear.' He glanced along the darkened seats for the best available view of the stage, 'but first we need to familiarise ourselves with the scientific community. Who they are; how they work. See, here,' he pointed at the stage, where the master of ceremonies was introducing the next speaker. 'Werner Heisenberg is giving a talk. I rather fancy listening to what he has to say.'

As he spoke, the audience erupted into applause, and a tall, balding scientist with grey hair and prominent eyebrows stepped out onto the stage, thanking the attendees in a

soft Germanic accent.

'I thought you said we were looking for a Frenchman?'

'Dupont. Yes, yes. CERN's rising star right now,' said the old man, his eyes fixed on the speaker, 'but this is *Heisenberg*. The father of quantum mechanics. Look, you see if you can find Dupont, and I'll meet you in the lobby in... ,' he glanced at his programme, 'an hour?'

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The girl, whose handwritten conference badge identified her as Miss Susan English, made easy progress without her grandfather in the way. She liked the name Susan, which wasn't *too* dissimilar to part of her real name. The one she used to use before the Doctor had brought her away with him. She barely remembered the exact circumstances of their departure. It had been hasty, and there had been danger, but she had been little more than a child back then, and she didn't really *want* to remember those things.

Earth, however, seemed nice, if hectic. The original plan, to seek refuge with another of their kind in the 49th Century, had turned a little sour, and now here they were with no plans, desperately trying to save the future of a world she had first come to learn about by reading Grandfather's research notes. It would, she believed, be a great crime for Earth's future to be wiped away by a reckless god that wouldn't even notice it was occupied.

The staff here were nice, too, extremely helpful. They had happily answered her questions and directed her to the lounge where Dupont and several other scheduled speakers were waiting for their turn on stage.

"Susan" peered through the door into the lounge. Inside, several middle-aged men were in the midst of animated discussions as plumes of tobacco smoke swirled overhead. She smiled. Grandfather would have been much happier here than in a stuffy auditorium having to sit and listen to a lecture. She tried to imagine him keeping quiet, but the image eluded her.

'Mademoiselle, can I help you?'

It was the barman. He was young, dark haired and quite handsome but not, from the way he was looking at her, interested. As a human he would assume she was younger than him, and treat her accordingly.

'I was looking for Professor Dupont. I was told that I could find him here.'

'That's right,' the barman pointed towards a tall, middle-aged mad with a shock of long, greying hair. From behind he looked like her grandfather. 'Do you want me to fetch him for you?'

Fetch? "Susan" didn't… ah. She realised that she looked under age. Too young to set foot in a bar. She looked around. The lobby seemed comfortable enough. It had coffee laid out for guests, toilets, and… a cloakroom, which was unattended.

'That's all right,' she smiled, 'I'm happy to wait out here until he's free.'

'Very well,' the barman smiled and too his leave, returning to the joys of ice-breaking, cigar-clipping and brandy-pouring that awaited him in the next room.

Alone at last, Susan crossed over to the cloakroom, setting aside the wooden partition to see the rails of overcoats and the racks of briefcases. She glanced nervously over her shoulder before commencing her search.

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The Doctor had failed to keep their appointment in the conference lobby. Rather than wait, Susan made enquiries, whereupon she learned that the Doctor had already left the building. Bemused, she prepared to leave, when the nice barman she had seen earlier, Raoul, told her he was finished for the day and had offered to drive her to the compound entrance. Chances were favourable that she would get there before 'Professor English' had reached the main gate.

It wasn't a long drive, and Raoul made the two or three minutes of their journey seem to pass even quicker. As they pulled in at the entrance, she caught a glimpse of her grandfather, who appeared to be in the middle of an altercation of some kind. A security guard was shoving the Doctor out into the road after dragging him along by the scruff of his neck. Thanking Raoul, Susan excused herself and stepped from the car. Outside, she could hear the Doctor's angry voice.

'…disgraceful,' he was saying. 'How dare you treat me this way? I'll have you know I'm a fellow of the Royal Society!'

'Are you all right, grandfather?' Susan ran over to help the old man as he tumbled onto the street.

'What? Yes, yes,' he said, brushing dust and dirt from his clothes before accepting a proffered hand and helping himself to his feet. 'It's just my pride that's bruised. I should have posted an abstract before we arrived. That way I could have told Heisenberg he was wrong with authority!'

She suppressed a giggle. Her grandfather *hadn't* managed to keep quiet during Doctor Heisenberg's lecture after all.

'Anyway,' he adjusted his clothes as he skilfully moved the subject away from his recent humiliation, 'how did you get on?'

Susan held out a small brown bundle. Dupont's wallet.

'Excellent, excellent,' the Doctor muttered, taking it from her and hastily examining its contents. Among the billfolds and ticket stubs he drew out a business card that bore the professor's details. 'Now, let's get you ready for your opening night, while I deal with the Professor.'

'Opening night?' Susan looked confused.

∞

Wednesday, July 4th 1962, 11.42pm CET
Rue des Carpières, Geneva

It had been a long day for Emil Dupont, and the first day of the conference had been a resounding success. Not for the usual reasons, he mused, but because of what happened to poor old Heisenberg. Apparently, half way through his lecture some elderly British scholar nobody seemed to have heard of stood up and started telling Werners how to eliminate quantum inaccuracies as a means of circumventing his most celebrated theory. Heisenberg had, understandably, been furious, but the uproar had led to some heated arguments about several of the points the old man had raised.

Passing into the lobby, Dupont summoned the lift, which rattled the outer cage as it began to rise from the basement below. As it reached the ground floor with a clunk, Dupont pulled the outer cage open, revealing that the lift had another passenger, an ageing man he didn't recognise. *He must be visiting old Mrs Reynard.*

Standing aside to let the stranger out, Dupont was surprised when the old man shook his head and smiled. He wanted to go up. Exchanging pleasantries and pressing the button for the third floor, Emil wondered about who the old man might be visiting as they ascended to, and then passed, the first floor.

Second or third floor then, thought Dupont, as the lift rattled its way upward. *Third.* The old man hadn't pushed a button. *But only I live…*

Emil felt something crash into the back of his skull, and everything went black.

∞

Thursday, July 5th, 1962, 9.30am EST
The United Nations Headquarters Complex, Turtle Bay, New York

Under Article 23 of the Charter of the United Nations, the Security Council always includes five so-called Permanent Members – Great Britain, the United States, France, the Republic

of China and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics – each of which holds the right of veto against any decision, even if supported by the full Council. Normally, meetings of the Security Council must also involve six non-permanent Council members, selected by the General Assembly.

This, however, was not a typical meeting.

Under Article 36 of the Charter of the United Nations the Security Council may, at any stage of a situation that might lead to international friction, recommend appropriate procedures or methods of adjustment. In 1949, at the request of the United States, such procedures were agreed, authorising the five permanent members to represent the full Security Council on matters of an extraterrestrial nature.

Instead of the brighter and more well-known Security Council chamber, the permanent members sat in an enormous triangular room that would have looked less out of place in the Pentagon. It was more than a hundred feet in diameter, and the concrete walls on one side of the room had been covered with a gigantic map of the world. In the middle of the half-lit room there was a large circular table covered in green baize and illuminated from above by a circle of tiny spotlights.

Here, five men sat in a semi-circle, called to order by Tingfu Tsiang, China's permanent representative to the UN, and serving as chair in the absence of the Ghanaian President of the Council who, as a non-permanent member, was excluded from attending.

To Tsiang's right sat the western representatives, Sir Patrick Dean, Her Majesty's Ambassador, Monsieur Armand Berard, the French Ambassador, and Adlai Ewing Stevenson II, former Democratic presidential candidate and United States Ambassador to the UN, and a close friend of President Kennedy. To Tsiang's left sat Platon Morozov, the Deputy Ambassador from the Soviet Union.

Tsiang spoke into his microphone, and a second or two later his translated words buzzed into their respective earpieces.

'Gentlemen,' he said, 'I apologise for the short notice, but today's extra-special meeting has been called at the request of the British delegation. Sir Patrick, you have the floor.'

'Thank you, Doctor Tsiang. Gentlemen, at approximately oh-seven hundred hours this morning, the following transmission was received by our satellite earth station at Goonhilly Down.'

With a nod towards the unseen control booth hidden in the darkness, Dean leaned forwards, steepling his fingers and measuring the expressions of his peers as the message was relayed to them through their earpieces.

'THIS IS THE VOICE OF THANATOS,' it said in a silvery, feminine voice.

'WE KNOW THAT YOU CAN HEAR US, EARTHMEN. YOUR WORLD HAS BEEN CHOSEN TO SUSTAIN THE NEEDS OF THANATOS.'

There was a measured pause that allowed the words and their meaning to sink in before it continued: 'THIS WILL MEAN THE DESTRUCTION OF ALL HUMAN AND ANIMAL LIFE ON EARTH. YOU HAVE THREE DAYS TO MAKE YOUR PLANS TO EVACUATE.'

There was another pause, and then: 'IT WILL BE USELESS FOR YOU TO RESIST.'

After a third pause the delegates slowly realised that the message had ended, and then it was Sir Patrick who broke the silence.

'There are two things you need to know about this transmission. First, that it was not translated. Everyone who hears the message appears to hear it in his or her own native language. Such a message is beyond the current technology available to Her Majesty's Government and, I suspect, your own.'

'And the second thing?' Stevenson asked.

'That the signal was received from outer space. Beyond the range of recent Mercury or Sputnik flights, or even the Telstar satellite. We are in no doubt that this signal is of extraterrestrial origin.'

'So, we get a warning and they expect us to roll over?' Stevenson wasn't impressed. 'Aren't aliens invaders supposed to blow up a city first, to demonstrate their great power?'

'One can only assume they wish to spare us from…'

'Pat, come on. They give us two days notice to evacuate the planet and you're suggesting they're being polite? Who, or what, is a Thanatos, by the way?

'Thanatos is Greek,' said Berard, 'it means "the personification of death" '.

'It's more than that,' said Dean. 'We think it's a translation. Our experts have identified it to mean "the destroyer". They think that whoever, or whatever, sent that message is committed towards the dissolution of all life.'

'The question is,' said Tsiang's translator, reasserting his lead, 'do we have any defence against this?'

'There's always a defence,' said Stevenson, removing his glasses to pinch at the bridge of his nose, 'if we know what it is we're up against. Is there any way for us to send a reply?'

'I have people working on that possibility,' said Dean, 'and we've already shared the information with the Pentagon and the Kremlin.'

'But all life on Earth?' Stevenson still wasn't convinced. 'It could be a bluff. We have no proof that they have that kind of technology.'

Coughing politely, Deputy Ambassador Morozov joined the debate. 'The Union of

Soviet Socialist Republics disagrees. The properties of the communication is itself evidence of superior technology. And even *we* have the capability, if not the will, to construct a doomsday machine capable of encircling the Earth in a lethal cloud of radioactivity that could kill billions!"

Stevenson blinked. The Soviets never played an open hand, especially in the current political climate, with Russian occupying forces still present in half the nations of Europe and President Kennedy and Chairman Khrushchev playing games of nuclear brinkmanship on an almost monthly basis.

'Absolute madness,' he said eventually. 'Why should anyone build such a thing?'

As the Ambassador spoke, the lighting in the centre of the table started to flicker, and a faint wheezing and moaning sound began to fill the chamber, its volume rising and rising until it sounded like a howling wind that threatened to drown out every noise before subsiding into silence. As it did this, a ghostly image appeared in the centre of the table. No, it was not an image, it was an object.

A wide silver disk about three feet in diameter had appeared in the middle of the green baize. Standing on it was a wraith-like figure. It was shortish, feminine, and appeared to be wearing a close-fitting body suit of some kind. Its head was featureless, except for a pair of raised green lenses which corresponded to where a human's eyes might be. These gave the silvery creature the appearance of an insect.

'Greetings, Earth people,' she/it said, using the same silvery voice as they had heard in the earlier transmission. 'I am the Herald of Thanatos.'

∞

Thursday, 5th July 1962, 2.36pm GMT
British Rocket Group, RAF Martlesham Heath, Suffolk

Professor Bernard Trainor crammed the last of his things into a Gladstone bag as he prepared for a hastily called flight to New York. He was tall and rugged-faced, his dark hair greying in places. Pulling on his overcoat, he acknowledged his team as they filed into his office for one last conversation. First was Rachel Jenson, the astrophysicist. She was a recent recruit, straight out of Cambridge, and was as sharp as she was efficient. Then came Angus Dalton, an old friend and rocket scientist like Trainor, but also a former test pilot and one of the few Europeans to have trained with NASA's astronauts. It was Angus who had coined the nickname "Cratermass" that Trainor was often called behind his back, and occasionally to his face. Three years of wartime rocket tests in abandoned quarries had done more for the Professor's reputation than twelve years at Cambridge University.

Finally, Captain Nathan Traske stepped into the room. Not officially part of the BRG, the Captain had instead been identified as the RAF Liaison. The Rocket Group was operating out of Air Force premises even if it did report to the Department of Space Security.

'What do we have, Rachel?' Trainor asked.

'Spectral analysis of the Goonhilly Signal remains inconclusive,' she replied, 'but the origin of the transmission appears to be a LaGrange point in high Earth orbit.'

'So it *is* coming from an object. A satellite, a spacecraft, or possibly an asteroid.'

'An asteroid?'

'Yes, Captain Traske. Contrary to popular belief there *are* objects inside Earth's orbit. Near-Earth asteroids. They're small, barely detectable, but definitely there. Earth, for example has at least two moons…'

'Oh come on, Professor Trainor, be serious.'

'He's perfectly serious, Captain,' said Angus, adding his own input. 'The distortion in that signal is exactly what we would expect to find in something relayed by satellite."

'Precisely,' agreed Trainor, 'and much as I'm willing to entertain the possibility of life on other planets, the idea that its representative would be a humanoid in a silver body suit stretches the bounds of credibility.'

Traske wasn't so sure. 'How do you explain the multiple languages and the appearance and disappearance of the Herald?'

'Red Herald, I call it,' quipped Angus.

'The Herald makes no sense,' Trainor continued. 'There's nothing we can possibly do to protect or save ourselves in three days. Ambassador Stevenson's plans to hide five hundred people deep underground might help, but I can't for the life of me understand how or why a creature of such a disposition would bother giving us a warning. We'd be like insects to it.'

'So what are you suggesting?' Traske asked.

'That it's a hoax. It may be an *alien* hoax, but it's playing on some very basic human emotions. We're being played by someone, and I want to know why.'

'Could it be a test,' asked Rachel, 'to see how we respond?'

'It's possible, I suppose. If there is intelligent life out there we're on the brink of joining a very exclusive community. But this just feels… wrong.'

'Wrong or not,' said Traske, 'the Prime Minister's instructions are very clear on the matter.'

Across the airfield a US plane was waiting to fly him to the United Nations complex, where he would be lending support and advice to the UN-appointed lead, Emil Dupont. The Frenchman's assignment hadn't been too much of a surprise. He was the

world's leading authority on particle beam technology, having recently returned to CERN after helping to define the U.S. Advanced Research Projects Agency's particle beam weapons programme. But despite Dupont's credentials, particle weapons were still a high-risk proposition. If the world was going to stand any chance against an alien invader, it would have to mobilise its rocket power, and lots of it.

'I'm ready, Captain,' Trainor said, pulling on his gloves and picking up his bag. 'I just hope Dupont's learned a few manners since the last time we met. Wish me luck everybody.'

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Thursday, 5th July 1962, 8.55pm EST
UN Security Compound, 15 miles west of New York City

The eight hour flight had been more than enough for Trainor to update himself on the reports provided by his staff and get a couple of hours' sleep. They'd left New York just as the sun was setting, and he was grateful that the bumpy ride was coming to an end. The jeep stirred up gouts of loose, dry dust as it turned into the compound. After about a quarter mile the dust gave way to tarmac, and they passed through an inner fence manned by a UN security checkpoint. Beyond this lay the white two-story shell of what looked to be an old schoolhouse.

Escorted inside, Trainor's suspicions were confirmed as he was escorted into a sports hall littered with mobile equipment. He could see oscillators, generators, workbenches, a clean tent, and across one wall a row of computer banks which appeared to be wired up to a glowing colour screen and keyboard which were thinner and smaller than anything of their kind he had seen before. Other than a couple of blue berets strategically located, most of the staff wore white coats, engaged in various stages of monitoring, testing and assembly. In the centre of the room was Dupont.

The older man had his back towards Trainor, and appeared to be discussing something with a female assistant who looked way too young to be here. Their discussion seemed animated, but broke off when the girl spotted the professor and pointed him out to Dupont. The old man turned and his eyes met Trainor's.

That's not Dupont, he thought as the old man waved and came to greet him.

'Professor Trainor,' the Frenchman smiled, offering his hand. 'I've been looking forward to meeting you. I've studied your rocket experiments with great interest.'

'Really, Emil?' Trainor decided it was best to keep silent about the impostor's identity. For now. 'Why would you be looking forward to meeting me? The last time we

crossed paths you called me an ignorant English buffoon.'

'Yes, yes,' The old man's eyes narrowed slightly at the suggestion that Trainor and Dupont had met. 'The consequences of a wild Gallic temper. Nothing to worry about.'

'No, I'm sure.' Trainor admired that the old man was keeping up the pretence. 'You weren't disappointed that the British government insisted that I keep an eye on things?'

The Frenchman sniffed dismissively. 'That wasn't how they put it. I think the British Ambassador explained that you would be rendering assistance.'

'Of course,' Trainor smiled. The impostor certainly *behaved* like Dupont. So how – given that you seem set on using particle beam technology – can I be of assistance? I'm a rocket man, not a particle physicist.'

'True, true. That's why I'm putting you in charge of Plan B.'

'Plan B?'

The old man gently touched his shoulder, guiding him towards the bank of computers set against the far wall. On closer inspection, each bank appeared to be configured differently, with its controls labelled in different languages. He could see English, Russian, French and Chinese.

'The Coordinated Global Missile Defence System,' he said, thrusting a clipboard into Trainor's hands. 'Let me have a list of your requirements and I'll have everything made ready for you within the hour.'

'Within the…' Trainor snapped. Plan B was clearly a red herring. A distraction to keep him occupied while the Frenchman carried out some mad scheme or other. 'Listen, Dupont, or whoever you are, if you seriously think we can cobble together a global missile defence system in three days…'

'Two…' the old man pressed, waving two fingers under Trainor's nose. 'Time's moving on, my boy.'

'In two days, then, you must have a screw loose. There's no way the Soviet and US governments will even admit what resources are at their disposal, let alone hand them over to a Frenchman or an Englishman.'

'True, but I wasn't thinking of asking them.' Dupont leaned forwards, lowering his voice conspiratorially. 'Listen, Bernard, we have a planet to save and no time to save it in. I didn't ask for your help, it's true, but you come highly recommended. I've seen the future and I know what's at stake. Earth will be burned into a cinder. Now,' he leaned back and raised his voice again for effect, 'are you going to dilly dally or are you going to help me out?'

'Neither.' Trainor turned on the stranger. *Pretence be damned.* 'It's you. You're the one behind this sham. The signal, the silver herald, and now some mad plan to blow a non-

existent alien invader out of the sky.'

The old man recoiled, momentarily surprised at the accusation.

'I don't know who you are, or even if you're from Earth, but it ends here. I won't give you control of the planet's rocket defences, and I certainly won't let you build a particle weapon big enough to ionise a planet.'

'Well, well,' the old man had recovered quickly, his eyes sparkling as he rose to the challenge. 'I see you need a little persuading. Please,' he beckoned Trainor forwards, heading towards the corner of the school hall, 'follow me.'

In the corner of the hall was a small khaki tent, into which the fake Dupont disappeared. Mindful that there could be a weapon inside, Trainor followed quickly behind, slipping through the canvas opening into large white room. It was bigger than the tent, and its walls were solid, made from white plastic or metal. Strange luminous roundels were recessed into the walls, and a gently sloping white ceiling drew his attention to the large hexagonal unit set into the ceiling.

Below the hexagon was a second hexagon, a workstation that combined the form and function of a desk and a computer bank. At first glance it looked contemporary, but the glowing blue perspex cylinder that lay at its apex looked like nothing on Earth.

'What is this place?' Trainor asked, realising that his vague suspicion – that Dupont was an alien – may just have been confirmed.

'Just my office,' said the old man, dropping the French accent. He gestured towards a large high-backed chair surrounded by a cluster of oriental furniture that looked like it was waiting to be placed around the room. 'I'm the Doctor, by the way. Please, do make yourself comfortable.'

As Trainor stepped inside, there was a hum and a click as the door behind him – not the canvas he had entered through – closed.

'What the…?'

The girl he had seen talking to the Doctor earlier was standing beside it, watching and waiting upon the old man's next move.

'Consider yourself kidnapped by aliens, Professor Trainor.' The Doctor seemed quite please with himself, his fingers steepled in thought as he started to explain himself. 'You're quite right of course. The signal. The Herald. All a charade.'

'But… why?' Trainor began, before answering his own question. 'It's the weapons.'

'Weapons?' The old man seemed offended, tutting and shaking his head in disappointment. 'I'm an alien, Professor Trainor, just as you surmised. What need would I have of nuclear bombs when I own a vessel like this? Think, man, what level of technology would you need to make the inside of an office bigger than the outside, hmm?'

'This is no office.' Trainor looked around again. The hexagonal workstation was a control console. It had meters, levers, switches, and monitors, everything you'd need to control a vessel. A ship.

'Quite right,' the Doctor seemed almost gleeful at the prospect of showing off his shiny toy. 'It's a time ship. A vessel that can travel through the dimensions of time and space.' He paused, lowering his tone. 'Usually.'

'Usually?' That one work revealed the Doctor's predicament. *He must be stranded on Earth.* 'So it's power you need?'

'Grandfather and I just want to save the Earth, professor,' said the girl, joining the Doctor beside the control console. 'We… like it.'

The Doctor smiled again, patting the girl's shoulder. 'Allow me to introduce you to…'

'Susan,' she said quickly, as if the Doctor were going to call her something else. 'My name is Susan.'

'Yes,' he confirmed. 'She's my granddaughter. As Susan says, we're from another place, millions of years and thousands of light years beyond your reach. We're stranded here because your planet really is in danger.'

'Why should I believe you?'

'Why indeed? We were forced to land in your time after we stumbled across an attack by a creature beyond comprehension. A creature that consumes life and time as if they were nothing.'

'Show him, grandfather,' Susan urged.

'Yes, yes, I could, couldn't I? Very well, Professor Trainor. I'll prove it to you.'

Turning to the console, the Doctor began twisting dials and flicking switches. As he did so, the perspex column in the centre of the workstation started to rise, rotate and fall.

'Stand well back,' he said, gesturing for Trainor to keep his distance.

'What are you doing?'

'We're taking off, Professor,' said Susan. 'Grandfather… do you think Doctor Dupont might also be interested in this?'

Dupont? Of course, thought Trainor, *they must have kidnapped him.* 'What have you done with him?'

'What else could we do?' The old man explained. 'I had to find a way to get access to your governments, to make them take the threat seriously.'

'He's unconscious,' said Susan.

'A harmless sedative, I assure you. I think it best to let the doctor sleep, Susan. He'll take his kidnapping far more personally than Professor Trainor here.'

As he spoke, a strange noise that defied description rose and filled the room. As it did so, instruments began flickering into life and the rise and fall of the perspex column got faster.

'Amazing,' Trainor said as he felt the hum of power coursing through the floor beneath his feet, 'what drives this thing?'

'Through time, or space?' the Doctor asked artfully. 'The power source is a stable singularity, but different drive systems are powered by changing the relative spin.'

'A black hole?' Trainor recalled his university grounding in general relativity and the theories of Oppenheimer and Snyder. 'You're using a black hole? Surely with that kind of technology you could defeat an alien invader, and you certainly don't need Earth technology.'

'Earth technology isn't necessary, but it helps us to avoid detection. We're fugitives, and defeating a creature like Thanatos would almost certainly attract the attention of our own people. Mobilising an Earth-based defence will cover our tracks, as it were.'

'So you have the power, but you can't use it?'

The Doctor nodded. 'Rather like your own nuclear weapons. Just because they're there doesn't mean you can use them. Besides, Thanatos isn't a typical threat, observe.'

Twisting a dial, the stranger opened a pair of vertical shutters set into the far wall. Beyond them was a wide-screen monitor that showed the image of a white cube travelling through space.

'What is that?'

'It's a prison.' Turning another dial the old man increased the magnification to reveal that the cube had a pitted, stone-like surface. 'Inside is a creature of unimaginable power. Inimical to the universe as we know it. Once free it will consume all life, all energy, all time, and all matter.'

'Once free? How will that happen?'

'It's been tumbling through the universe for fifteen billion years, slowly eroding the outer shell. See how weathered it's become?'

Trainor looked at the monitor again. He could see something pulsating inside. Like blood pumping through the veins of an illuminated hand. Then he noticed the stars. They were bigger and brighter than pictures he had seen before, and there were dust particles in the foreground. This, he concluded, was an image being captured in space, not from any Earth-based telescope.

'Where are we?'

'About six hundred and fifty million miles from Earth, somewhere between the orbits of Jupiter and Saturn. The prison is moving at light speed on a direct collision course with your sun. When it arrives there, the outer shell will crack, and Thanatos will emerge.

First, he will enter and consume the sun, absorbing its mass and taking physical form. When the sun goes out he'll suck the remaining heat from the surrounding space, and then the energy from the surrounding time.'

'A living black hole?' Trainor, considered a leading voice in the scientific community, was struggling with the concept.

'As I said, inimical to the universe.'

'So how do we stop it?'

'We? Ah,' the Doctor smiled. 'I see you're finally coming around.'

Trainor's mind was racing as he walked over to the monitor screen, thinking through the consequences of what he was seeing. 'I don't see how rockets will be any use at all. They're certainly not fast enough, and even if that cube did an Earth fly-by the timing of their detonation couldn't hope to alter its course.'

'But at least it keeps you all busy, eh?' the Doctor said. 'If the world is doing something the people will have hope. Do nothing and they panic.'

'But the people won't know. It's all top secret.'

'Secret for the general public,' the Doctor corrected, 'but what about the politicians, the generals, and the scientists, hmm? You don't think they need hope too?'

'All right,' said Trainor, 'I understand. So how is firing a particle beam at the sun going to work?'

'If it *were* a particle weapon, and it *could* cover such a range, it might do some small amount of damage,' the Doctor conceded, 'but nothing on the scale required. Fortunately, it isn't a particle beam, it's a spotlight.'

'You want to attract the creature's attention?'

'No, I want to target it. A weakly interacting superluminal beam has already locked on to the cube, tracking its journey. When the shell enters the sun's corona it's going to rupture, and Thanatos will emerge. In seconds he'll gather enough mass to take physical form. We need to strike before that happens.'

'With what?'

'This,' the old man clapped his hands together, and a door slid silently open. Moment's later a black rectangular box the size of a coffin floated through it. Silently crossing the room it came to a stop, hovering at waist height. On its surface was a Greek symbol, Ω.

'What is that?' Trainor asked, certain that he was looking at a doomsday device. The symbol omega was often used to denote an ending.

'It's called a remote stellar manipulator,' the Doctor started to confirm Trainor's fears, 'designed by my people to rip out the core of a sun or the nucleus of a black hole. In the wrong hands it's perhaps the most devastating weapon that my people have devised.'

'And in *your* hands?'

'It's already programmed to follow the particle beam the instant that the cube ruptures.'

'And then?'

'That's the really clever part,' said the Doctor.

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The Cosmic Cube, somewhere in the Solar System

The entity stirred.

It had been a long sleep. Aeons of imprisonment had passed unnoticed since the day that time stood still. The sky had not long shifted from green to black as the rift between universes opened and the feeding began again.

Thanatos remembered.

The Great Old Ones they had called themselves, daring to challenge his power in a showdown which brought their universe crashing around their ears. They had built a world so large, and so powerful, that even he could not consume it. He had pursued them, and they had found a means of escape.

A rift between the universes.

Fleeing his hunger, the Yssgaroth swarms had plunged headlong into the rift, blindly fleeing into a time and space alien to their existence in every way.

But he pursued them. Disoriented by its strange laws, Thanatos struggled to find the Yssgaroth, instead finding them scattered and defeated by a new enemy. A world rich with life and power, whose champions challenged the balance of nature itself. They had dared to call themselves Lords of Time, and they had dared to oppose him.

Thanatos had wreaked havoc upon them, consuming the smaller of their suns before turning upon their fragile and insignificant world. Their champion, Rassilon, had frozen time itself to parley with him, and Thanatos had agreed to take physical form to commune with the insignificant gnat. No world had ever challenged him and survived, and Rassilon's defeat of the Yssgaroth had robbed him of the last morsel in his universe-sized appetite.

Rassilon and his Time Lords were to be the first of many such morsels consumed in this new universe. Thanatos the Devourer would never be sated.

They met on a small moon where, even in physical form, Thanatos towered above his adversary.

'WHO DARES TO CHALLENGE ME?' he demanded.

'Lord Thanatos, I am Rassilon, and I *will* defeat you.'

'BRAVE WORDS, GNAT. BUT I HAVE CONSUMED THE LIFE OF AN ENTIRE UNIVERSE. MY HUNGER IS UNCHECKED. MY POWER IS BEYOND MEASURE. HOW CAN YOU DEFEAT ME?'

'That's the easy part,' said Rassilon. 'The difficulty will be in showing you. I haven't the means of demonstrating to a creature of such immense size.'

It had been a trick. Thanatos could see that now. But he had been so overconfident, so sure of himself, that he had stooped to the insect's level. Shedding mass, Thanatos reformed himself at a size where the Gallifreyan could meet his gaze.

'WELL?' he had asked.

'I created the rift that allowed you into my universe. I created the great cog that turns my universe. I've tamed its higher powers and I have mastery over its laws.'

'This,' Rassilon had held out a white cube, 'is the Key to Time. Its power holds the universe in check for as long as it will take me to imprison you. When this conversation ends, you will threaten us no more.'

And with those words, Thanatos had felt walls of crystallised time close around him, and his thoughts had ceased, until now. Even time could not hold him forever, and aeons of hunger were pent up inside him as the walls weakened, and time slowly crept forwards. As the heat of a sun approached him, time accelerated, and the walls began to crack. As they did so, Thanatos could feel the heat and power that surrounded him. He began to shed the puny form he had assumed long ago, growing to absorb the solar heat and resume his true form as the largest and greatest vampire ever to have existed.

As he grew, he felt something at the edge of his senses. Insignificant, as Rassilon had been. Once he would have ignored it, but after being tricked so easily…

It was a beam of weak particles, and they were coming from a small world in orbit around the sun. He could see from its aura that it was lighting up the sky, its brilliant life-giving glow like a beacon guiding his urge to feed. All that life… he started to move from the sun's corona, his urge to feed momentarily blinding his senses as he started to transform himself into purest energy.

In that moment, Thanatos failed to sense the new arrival.

The Hand.

In the blink of an eye a small black box appeared beside him, unfolding itself into the higher dimensions like a giant flower that touched every thread of his existence. Mapping, measuring and judging him, it closed again. As it did so, Thanatos realised it had attached itself to him at a quantum level, hooking itself to every particle of his existence, and pulling it inside the box.

As the remote stellar manipulator winked out of existence, it took Thanatos with

it. Moments later he found himself… somewhere else. The box faded away as he examined his new surroundings. Lots of temporal energy, like Rassilon's cube, but this was different. There was matter, and life. It was scattered, but it could be consumed.

Thanatos reached out for the flotsam and jetsam that drifted across the periphery of the space-time vortex. As he did so, he relinquished his physical form, stretching himself beyond his limits. The vortex wasn't another universe, it was another dimension, and its laws were very different. As Thanatos reached for matter that seemed to be within his spatial grasp, he realised too late that it was beyond his temporal limits.

Cold winds bit into him, and pulled at him, scattering Thanatos and sucking him, piecemeal, towards the distant centre of the vortex. Particle by particle, the being that had once been Thanatos drifted away with the winds of time.

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Three figures sat huddled around a small monitor screen trailing wires and cables that led to the small tent that nestled in the corner of the school hall. As the image of the creature they called Thanatos faded away, the coffin-shaped box gently reappeared at the Doctor's side.

The room was dark, and Susan didn't like the shadows. Her grandfather had dismissed the rest of the staff earlier in the evening, leaving herself and Trainor to witness the launch of the Hand and its rapid deployment ninety three million miles away. Looking down at the device, she noted that it wasn't even radiating heat.

'That's it?' Trainor asked, looking suspiciously down at the box.

'Professor, you don't need impressive firework displays to save a planet,' said the Doctor, 'just careful planning.'

'This eleventh hour hash-up was careful planning?'

'We work to the timescales we are given, and your planet's obsession with red tape was just getting in the way.'

'We're outsiders, Professor.' Susan could see another argument brewing. Despite their similarities, the two scientists had different methods, and Professor Trainor's inability to do anything besides watch from the sidelines was clearly bothering him. 'We shouldn't even be getting involved. We saw what Thanatos did. A forty light year wide hole where your solar system used to be. If you think we could just stand by and let that happen…'

'I'm sorry, Susan,' said Trainor. 'You're right, of course. Mankind needs to take control of its own destiny, to fight its own battles. But,' he turned to the Doctor, 'you've shown me that we aren't ready to win that fight yet. One day, perhaps, but until then, what can we do?'

'Be vigilant, Professor,' the Doctor smiled, pulling himself up to his full height and fingering the lapels of his jacket. 'Undoing what Thanatos did isn't as simple as you think. You're living at the heart of a major change in history that could take decades to put right.'

'But the governments…'

'Governments are easily overthrown,' the Doctor said with a twinkle in his eye, 'but this isn't a problem of their making. Thanatos threatened Earth because of something my people did a very long time ago. It's true that mankind has the chance to shape its destiny like it never has before, but time is out of joint. Susan and I will stay a while, to help you rebuild. But that's all we can do. Help. You must go forward with your own convictions, and you must do what you must to make the world a better place. You can blame the politicians all you like, but remember you put them there. You're an influential man, Professor Trainor, and I believe that you can change the course of history for the better.'

The Monster Factory

Alec Daniels

I was lucky enough to spend the last few years of Craig's life arguing with him in forums about one of his favourite subjects – canonicity and continuity. Craig had an encyclopaedic knowledge of Doctor Who *lore. Not just the official, televised stuff, but also the fan fiction and the many spin-off media that blossomed after the original series' tragic demise in 1989.*

One of Craig's maxims was that all things fitted into the bigger picture – that there was no canon, just Doctor Who*; that if you wanted you could find an answer for everything.*

It was that open and inclusive approach that endeared Craig to so many online fora, and since his departure forums like Jade Pagoda*,* Newapocrypha *and the* Continuity Cops*, of which he was a mainstay, have become pale shadows of their former selves.*

Craig was well-known for his passions for the second Doctor's comic book enemies – in particular the Quarks and their Giant Wasps – and it was this enthusiasm for what others would instantly reject as childish or ludicrous that really singled Craig out. He never let go of his inner child, and that made him a great champion of the new series in fan circles. He never forgot that Doctor Who *is first and foremost for families, and that it was bigger than the TV format. I'm sure his canon included his own childhood stories and drawings, and would probably have been just as accepting of mine.*

When I watch the new series I realise that so much of Craig's legacy has already appeared on-screen. He had a regular dialogue with Russell T Davies, and always had a passion for such concepts as Daleks vs Cybermen, whose own iconic battle in the Series 2 finale Doomsday *took place at Canary Wharf – a landmark he had made his own way back in his sixth Doctor novel* Millennial Rites. *His use of quantum mnemonics in the same story almost certainly inspired the Skasas Paradigm seen in* School Reunion*, and the news that a Giant Wasp would be appearing in Series 4 had me weep a tear of joy that Russell T Davies was making one of Craig's dreams – seeing the Doctor tussling with giant wasps on the big screen – a reality.*

So here's my contribution – harking back to the days of Fighting Fantasy *and* Find Your Fate *books* – The Monster Factory.

– 1 –

The Doctor has changed since your recent reunion, and your adventures are no longer the random meanderings you remember from your youth. Before the Time Lords.

Nowadays the Doctor seems to be looking over his shoulder at every corner,

cursing his people for their interference, and wearing the weight of his many years on shoulders more slumped, and with hair a shade greyer than the mop of thick black hair you first saw when he went by the name of Dr Von Wer.

Doctor Who.

Still, the years have taken their toll on you as well. No longer the fresh-faced Scots piper plucked from the fields of Culloden. After years of travelling with the Doctor, young Jamie McCrimmon had returned to a very different Scotland. Not somewhere you wanted to stay. You had quickly left for the New World to seek adventure, first as a seaman and then a pirate captain. Finally you returned as a wealthy man to buy land you now own as the Laird of the McCrimmons.

At least until the Doctor came again, and your lost memories returned.

In the old days, your adventures with the Doctor were making you a man, but now he needs an older Jamie to look out for him. Jamie, the weathered, experienced warrior.

Thunk.

When the tip of your dirk slams into the target's bull's-eye for the third time in a row, you know your skills with a knife have become well honed. The target, the Doctor had told you, is called a dartboard. Darts, he explained, is an indoor sport popular in the twentieth century, a period for which he has always had a special fondness.

You recover your knife, and then prepare to throw it for a fourth time. Drawing back your arm, you let fly at the target as the TARDIS shudders, and the blade falls wide, sinking into the white wooden frame of your bedroom door.

Retrieving the blade, you slip outside, entering the winding corridor and running the short distance to the bridge – the control room – of the TARDIS. The Doctor's time ship.

Moving rapidly from panel to panel, the Doctor seems unhappy with what is happening. Flicking switches and thumping the mushroom-shaped control console in the middle of the big white room, he seems desperate to reverse whatever process has begun, as the clear round time rotor rises and falls in the centre of the column, announcing to its passengers that the TARDIS is in flight.

'What is it, Doctor?' you ask, sheathing your dirk and joining him at the console.

'Another mission, Jamie,' the Doctor sighs. 'More espionage, I'm afraid. This really isn't me, you know.'

'It's not that bad, Doctor,' you reassure him. 'We always seem to be doing the right thing, wherever they send us.'

'Do we?' he replies, unconvinced. 'I sometimes wonder. The Time Lords' agenda seems to be getting pettier and pettier as we go on. First it's about saving the universe, then preserving the laws of time, then protecting Gallifrey's political interests, and now this!'

'This? What have we been asked to do?'

'An investigation into another of my people. They think he might be using Time Lord technology in contravention of some intergalactic treaty or other they signed millions of years ago. So long ago, in fact, that the Time Lords are the only signatories left in existence!'

'Not exactly universe-shaking stuff, then?'

'Not remotely. I left home to get away from the bureaucrats, and now they've followed me. It's not fair!'

He thumps the console again, and as he does so the time rotor stops. Your journey is complete. Looking up, he flicks one final switch, and the view screen shields slide open to reveal a black and white image of the landscape that awaits you outside.

'Well, here we are,' he says. 'Pluto. Once the ninth planet of the solar system before it was declassified, reclassified, and declassified again.'

'So what is it now?'

'Just an abandoned ball of rock and ice riddled with tunnels once home to the remnants of a major galactic civilisation. No atmosphere, I'm afraid, and gravity a fifth of Earth's.'

'Like the moon?' You vaguely remember a similar landscape from one of your early adventures together. 'Will we need spacesuits?'

'No. We've landed inside an artificial atmosphere, on the outskirts of a giant dome that's slowly being turned into a major human settlement. A hard hat might be useful, but otherwise we should be fine.'

'Oh, right,' you reply, none the wiser. 'So where are we going?'

'It's called the Wilmarth Institute of Advanced Xenomorphic Studies. They study alien biology as a way of advancing their understanding of the universe. They're building it here because of the tunnels, the cold, and the distance from Earth. Close enough to keep an eye on, and far enough away not to be talked about.'

'So, they cut aliens open and study them?'

'It's the 23rd Century, Jamie. More probes and scanners than hacksaws and surgical knives, thank goodness. Now, let's explore, shall we?'

Opening the TARDIS doors, the Doctor gestures for you to step outside.

Stepping out onto Pluto's surface, you feel a little queasy as your insides shift around a little. You are indeed inside a giant dome whose walls stretch way up above your head. It seems to be transparent, but the surface seems to capture and emphasise the starlight, magnifying distant pinpricks of light to create a dazzling brightness on the ground around you.

Just as the Doctor said, the surface of Pluto looks like a giant building site, with

cranes and scaffolding around the edges of the settlement, and buggy tracks crisscrossing the rough surface of the ground.

Pointing into the distance, the Doctor picks out a tall pyramid.

'That's the Institute,' he says, before drawing your attention to some smaller, nearer buildings, which seems to lie on the other side of a large pit where rock and other raw materials are being quarried, 'and that's the settlement, where the workers live. Shall we press on, or take some time to find out what's going on?'

- **If you want to visit the settlement, but would rather avoid the quarry, go to section 3**

- **If you want to press on and investigate the Institute, go to section 11**

- **If you want to cut across the quarry and visit the settlement, go to section 21**

– 2 –

As the Rani and the Quark Ambassador disappear ahead of them, Gwarn and Garrack escort you into the demonstration room. Here you join the other delegates whom the Doctor introduces to you. There is the Viceroy of Effering (a dog-faced biped from beyond Orion), a Draconian Ambassador, Don Quarn of the Farseen Syndicate (a blue-skinned walking pineapple dressed in an ill-fitting suit) and the Theocrat of Tarpang (a four-horned centaur and leader of a particularly brutal jihad against the Space Nomads of Gething) and a Robotic Advocate from the Ninth Dimension (whose native species have never been seen, but are known to covet the rest of the universe's three-dimensional lifestyle).

'They all have one thing in common,' whispers the Doctor. 'They all need armies. The Effering don't have opposable thumbs, the Draconians are bound by a nonaggression pact with the Jeloob, whose only stipulation is that no Draconian sets foot on Jeloob worlds, the Farseen are a family rather than a species, so need an army of enforcers to carry out their instructions, the Tarpang's use of suicide bombers has so depleted their armies that they need to find a viable alternative, and the denizens of the Ninth Dimension can't interact in our universe.

'And the Quarks?' you ask.

'Yes, the Ambassador said that they were sponsors. But what would they want from a deal with the Rani? Perhaps they're at war with an enemy that uses Leptonite or Electromagnetic Wave Technology. Or maybe...'

Nudging the Doctor in the ribs, you point to the Rani and the Quark Ambassador,

who have just returned to join the delegates.

'Delegates, thank you for your patience, and welcome to the Wilmarth Institute of Advanced Xenomorphic Studies. As you know, the planet Earth sits at a galactic crossroads which has made it the target of alien invasions for many centuries. This and the recent expansion of Earth interests beyond its solar system have created a unique opportunity to turn the study of alien biology into the cutting edge of military research.'

Behind her, on the other side of a perspex screen, three white-suited technicians enter from left and right, each carrying a greenish ellipse, which they carefully place around a large round table of some kind.

'On the other side of this screen,' the Rani explains, 'we are preparing a brief demonstration. Those eggs…' she indicated the ellipses '…have had their size increased by a factor of a hundred and ten. Inside are creatures which have been implanted with a synaptic nucleus which allows remote battle computers to override the creature's instincts.'

'Fascinating…' the Doctor mutters, leaning forwards as the Rani continues. She produces a remote control device which, at the flick of a switch, bathes the room beyond in a sickly pink light.

'I'm now accelerating the hatching process, so that time is accelerated, bringing forward a fully adult specimen.'

As she explains, the green eggs start to break and mandibles appear, biting their way around its top point, exposing the creature inside.

'It's a maggot!' you say, disgusted.

'No,' the Doctor says. '*Vespula vulgaris*.'

'What...' you begin.

'The Doctor is quite right, Hamish,' says the Rani, as the creature emerges. As it does so the lid of the large round table starts to unscrew – like a giant jam jar – rising above the lip of what looks like a container underneath, 'it's a giant insect.'

'A bug,' you look incredulously at the larvae, which head towards the giant pot which you realise you can smell. 'Pears?'

'Pear jam,' the Doctor concurs, pointing to ventilators which allow the smell into the room. 'They're feeding.'

'Ah,' you say, watching the larvae eat and grow and change again, 'They're no' bugs. They're giant wasps, just like...'

'Shhh,' the Doctor interrupts you, 'That's what I said. *Vespula vulgaris*, the yellowjacket or common wasp.'

There, buzzing around the jam, you see three such insects. Not the small centimetre-long variety you are used to, but monstrosities somewhere between two and three feet long, held aloft by impossibly fragile wings whose beats leave them as just a

blur.

'Precisely,' the Rani says. 'I was commissioned by the Quarks to create an invasion force capable of utilising Darkling battlesuits, a particularly vicious technology once indigenous to Pluto and other outposts of the Darkling Empire. The Quarks aren't exactly built for war, so the specification was for something insectoid, programmable, but capable of functioning ruthlessly if there was an equipment failure. These...' she indicates the three buzzing wasps now hovering above the big jar, '...are the result.'

One of the wasps breaks away, flying towards the screen and hovers around the perspex for a moment. Instinctively you feel panic rise and flinch, ready to strike at the air in front of you.

'Don't worry,' the Rani reassures you, 'the perspex is too strong for it to break through.'

The wasp, however, has other ideas, moving across to the small ventilation grille where its antennae quiver and its mandibles attempt to get purchase.

'I do hope your temporal grace is set to protect against natural attacks as well as automated ones,' says the Doctor, backing away into the crowd of delegates as a piece of perspex splinters, 'otherwise this is going to be a very costly auction.'

As the perspex shatters the lead wasp quickly close the gap between itself and the delegates, hovering threateningly overhead.

'I bloody hate wasps,' you mutter, letting fly with your hastily prepared dirk.

'No, Jamie, *no!*'

Catching the creature squarely in the malar space between its eye and its jaw, dropping it instantly, buzzing and twitching, to the floor.

'You really shouldn't have done that,' the Rani says as the creature drops to the ground. 'An injured wasp releases pheremones that summon the rest of the nest.'

□ **Go to section 22**

– 3 –

Reaching the settlement, you enter the first public building that you find, closing the door behind you and pausing to catch your breath. The Starlodge sign outside had been welcoming enough, promising cheap and comfortable accommodation for the weary traveller. Inside, however, the inn appears to be empty.

After ringing the reception bell for two or three minutes, the Doctor gets impatient and leads you deeper into the building. Some way inside, you stumble across a bar area filled with workmen and a single member of staff behind the bar. As you step

inside, the room goes quiet.

'Hello,' your friend grins, 'I'm the Doctor, and this is my friend Jamie. We're new here, and I was hoping you could give us some directions. We're looking for the Wilmarth Institute.'

'But…' you start to tell the Doctor that he already knows where the Institute is – he pointed it out earlier. But you stop yourself as he gives you a sideways glance and you realise it is just his way of getting information. There is a brief pause as the workers exchange glances, and then one of them speaks up.

'The Wilmarth Institute's a bad place to be visiting. You're better off catching the next transit home.'

'Oh, dear,' the Doctor says, settling down at the same table as the workers. As he does so, he lowers his voice. 'I'm here to start a new job. Head of Xenogeology. They say my predecessor disappeared mysteriously, you know.'

'A lot of people disappear mysteriously around there,' another of the workers explains. 'Two of our lads were last seen near there before they disappeared. With all the keep out signs we're sure that's where they must have gone, and the management seem to be covering it up. They say the lads went back home, but they left all their gear behind.'

'Most unusual,' says the Doctor. 'Who exactly are *the management*, by the way?'

'Well, the whole settlement's owned by the Wilmarth Foundation, so *their* management is *our* management.'

'Which makes it difficult for you to get answers. I see.'

'Listen,' says the first worker, 'if you're going over to the Institute, will you see if you can find anything out about the lads? Their names are Tomas Sampson and Carl Millar.'

- **If you decline the invitation and insist on leaving, go to section 6**

- **If you agree to help, go to section 7**

– 4 –

Following the Doctor's tried and tested method of dealing with overwhelming physical odds, you choose to run away, following the Doctor, whose short legs always seem to carry him away faster than a taller, fitter man like yourself.

∞

Once you are out of sight and certain that you aren't being pursued, you both slow down and resume your examination of the building. It isn't long before you find a small door, which the Doctor quickly opens with a few pulses from his sonic device.

As you slip inside the automated lighting system springs to life, bathing you in a pool of artificial light as you make your way along the corridor. It is a very bright, but very bland, affair that stretches away for about thirty feet before splitting into two. One corridor, to the left, inclines upwards, while the second, to the right, slopes down.

'Very NHS,' the Doctor mutters, indicating coloured lines on the marbled floor. 'Those things are only helpful if you know what the colours represent. So…' he turns for your opinion, 'shall we go left, or right?'

- **If you follow the right hand corridor, go to section 14**

- **If you follow the left hand corridor, go to section 15**

– 5 –

The dogs snarl and snap and slather as they form a semi-circle and surround you. They look similar to the big wolfhounds brought over from Ireland by the English back on Earth, but with thicker, bulkier hides, and those teeth… they are *very* different.

Glittering.

Artificial.

Diamond.

'I don't like the look of this,' the Doctor says cautiously. 'Whatever these creatures are, they've been bred to tear their victims to shreds.'

Carefully, you reach down and withdraw your dirk, readying it for hand-to-jaw combat with these creatures.

Suddenly, they pounce.

∞

The first of the dogs leaps through the air, and your dirk flashes upwards, finding its mark and impaling the beast. Its body crashes into you, knocking you to the ground before falling beside you, your blade still embedded deep within its throat.

'Oh, my giddy aunt,' the Doctor mutters, looking desperately for cover. As he does so, the other two dogs quickly veer away, a low growl in their throats as they reassess you. At least they don't seem to realise you are now unarmed. At your feet, their brother

lies motionless, the life slowly ebbing from its veins.

More cautious now, the two dogs move forwards again, forming a pincer with you and the Doctor in the middle. This time, you realise, you might not be so lucky.

'Jamie, look!' the Doctor whispers, pointing behind the dogs.

Some distance away you can see a tall, bearded stranger dressed in a dark uniform of some kind. You notice that in his hand he holds several leather straps. *Leashes.* Whoever he is, this man is in charge of the dogs.

□ **If you shout to the dogs' keeper for assistance, go to section 8**

□ **If you stay focused on combat with the dogs, go to section 9**

□ **If you decide to cut and run away, go to section 24**

– 6 –

'Look,' you interrupt, 'we haven't got time for this. We need to be getting to the Institute, Doctor.'

'Yes, yes, Jamie, you're quite right.' The Doctor smiles at the locals before excusing himself. 'I'm sorry we can't stay and help you find your friends. It wouldn't look good if I was asking lots of questions on my first day of work, now, would it?'

'I knew we couldn't trust them,' one of the workers says angrily. 'They'll tell their bosses we're suspicious and all hell will break loose.'

'He's right,' says another worker. 'They're probably part of the whole set up. I say we sort them out before they report back to their bosses.'

There is a murmur of agreement amongst the workers, who rise from their seats and begin to surround you. Sensing danger, you step in front of the Doctor and draw your dirk.

'Come on, lads,' you say, eyeing them defensively, 'we don't want any trouble.'

'It's too late for that,' says a worker, throwing a cup at you as he and his friends surge forwards. 'Get them!'

'Oh, dear,' the Doctor whispers from behind you. 'Run, Jamie. Run like the wind!'

□ **Go to section 24**

– 7 –

'Of course we'll help you,' the Doctor says. 'Tomas and Carl, you say? I'll remember that, and if we find them, we'll do whatever we can to help them. Won't we, Jamie?'

'Aye,' you answer. 'If you've got the Doctor's word your friends are as good as found.'

'Well, we can but try,' the Doctor curbs your enthusiasm. 'It's been how long? Two weeks? Anything could have happened in that time. Still, we'll do our best. Where were they last seen?'

'There's a locked gate leading into a warren of tunnels underneath the Institute. It comes out into the quarry.'

'So the tunnel leads into the Institute itself?'

'It might,' says one of the locals, 'we don't know. That's what Carl and Tomas were trying to find out.'

'I see. Well, if you can give us directions, we'll be on our way. If lives are at stake there's no time to lose.'

- **If you decide to explore a little more, go to section 10**

- **If you decide to go straight to the Institute, go to section 11**

- **If you decide to seek out the locked gate, go to section 12**

– 8 –

'Hello!' the Doctor calls out to the stranger in the distance.

'Can you call these things off?' you shout, louder and slightly more desperately than the Doctor.

The creature's hackles bristle as you call to their master, and their growls get louder. As they start to move the stranger shouts a command, and they break away, quickly moving to heel at the sound of their master's voice.

Kneeling beside the fallen dog, the Doctor starts to examine the creature as its brothers and its master close the short distance between you.

'Who are you? What do you want?' the stranger demands. Up close you can see that he is a big and broad-shouldered man, easily close to seven feet in height. What you took, at first glance, to be padding, is now clearly identifiable as solid muscle.

'I rather think that question is for you to answer,' says the Doctor, closing the dead animal's eyes. 'I'm afraid your pet here is dead, which wouldn't have happened if he'd been kept on a leash. We're not trespassing, so why did you allow these animals to attack

us?'

Crossing his big forearms, the man doesn't rise to the Doctor's accusation. Instead, with the calm assurance of a seasoned warrior, he stated his position.

'This settlement is privately owned, which means that you *are* trespassing, even by walking the streets. It hasn't opened to settlers yet because it isn't finished, so only contractors and suppliers come and go. You don't look like contractors, and the suppliers never leave the port building. So I'll ask again, who are you?'

'I'm the Doctor, this is Jamie, and we've been sent to meet with the Institute's Director.'

'Really? On what business?'

'It's private.'

'If it's private, you'll be able to tell me the Director's real name, won't you?'

'Er… not really.' the Doctor looks coy, 'I haven't met him before, you see, and…'

'Her… the Director is a lady, and she only sees people by invitation. Do you have an invitation?'

'Yes, of course.' The Doctor starts patting at his pockets, dipping his hands inside and turning them inside out before smiling meekly. 'I seem to have lost mine in the scuffle. Jamie?'

You shrug awkwardly. The Doctor hasn't told you much about your mission. Certainly not enough for you to help bluff your way out of trouble this time.

'Well, no invite, no meeting with the Director. You want to be careful where you go without proper papers. I suggest you go back and get some new ones, or else leave this place and don't bother coming back.'

'Hang on,' you interrupt, 'what about your dog?'

Throughout the entire exchange the stranger hadn't once shown any concern about his pet's death. In your experience, dog owners always form a close bond with their charges, and would never be so callous.

'What about it? It's dead. Now get going before I decide to let the others have their revenge.'

- **If you decide to go away, you can run left and go to section 4, or run right, going to section 12**

- **If you stay and fight, go to section 14**

– 9 –

Diving to the ground, you manage to roll and retrieve your dirk from the dead beast at your feet just as the two other creatures close in on you.

The first draws blood as its powerful jaws close around your ankle, while the second is set on worrying your shoulder, sinking its fangs deep into your flesh. Sweeping up your blade, you bury it deep into the brain of the first dog, whose jaws go slack leaving your ankle free. Your dirk, however, is lodged inside its skull and won't come free.

You scream in agony as the second hound's jaws snap your collar bone and a mist of blood sprays into the air as an artery is severed. Shaking your torso, it starts to tear at the flesh of your arm and chest. You feel your nerves tingle as your knife arm goes limp.

'Jamie!' The Doctor has stopped running, turning back to help you, but the pain in your chest and the look on his face tell you it's too late. The creature's slavering jaws fill your field of vision and everything goes black.

☐ **Go to section 30**

– 10 –

The settlement is a big place, and the maze of streets quite confusing. The Doctor seems to be talking it all in his stride, looking deep in thought as if he is mapping it all in his head. After several stops and starts, he sucks his finger and sticks it in the air.

'Why would there be wind inside a dome, Doctor?' you ask, confused by his action.

'Oh, extractors suck the bad air in and vents pump the good air out. These places usually have the extractor in the middle and the pumps at the edge. It's just my way of knowing where we are relative to the Institute.'

As you follow the Doctor around the next corner you are surprised to find him back into you. Half-turning, he pushes you back around the corner, clearly fearful of something…

In the distance, you can see four bulky figures. Tall, brutish bald men with thickset foreheads and a dark grey pallor to their skin. Dressed in leather they jog towards you, armed with a variety of guns and batons.

'Ogrons,' the Doctor hisses.

☐ **If you fight the Ogrons, roll 1D6. On a 1-4 go to section 13. On a 5-6 go to section 14**

If you run away, roll 1D6. On a 1-4 go to section 14. On a 5-6 go to section 17

– 11 –

Standing in front of the tall, slender arched doorway, the Doctor starts to explain that Ebenezer Fletcher was one of the great architectural masters of the late 22nd Century. He had been the main exponent of the Nouveau Renaissance introduced during the rebuilding of Earth after the Great Dalek Invasion of 2157, and his designs for the great domed settlements that sprung up across the solar system at this time were strongly based on the Macintosh rose motif. This, he tells you, was in homage to the great Scottish designer, Charles Rennie Macintosh,

'The rose,' the Doctor says, pulling out his trusty sonic screwdriver to open the door, 'makes navigation as easy as…' his voice trails away and he puts his finger to his lips.

'Do you hear *that*?' he whispers.

Straining to listen, you hear a faint rumbling noise… like the low growl of a guard dog. A very angry guard dog.

Carefully, you turn around to find three snarling dog-beasts that snap and slather as they form a semi-circle and surround you. They look similar to the big wolfhounds brought over from Ireland by the English back on Earth, but with thicker, bulkier hides, and those teeth… they are *very* different.

Glittering.

Artificial.

Diamond.

'I don't like the look of this,' the Doctor says cautiously. 'Whatever these creatures are, they've been bred to tear their victims to shreds.'

Slowly reaching down to withdraw your dirk, you feel the reassuring weight of its handle in your palm as the first of the creatures pounces. The blade flashes upwards, finding its mark and impaling the beast. Its body crashes into you, knocking you to the ground before falling beside you, your blade still embedded deep within its throat.

'Oh, my giddy aunt,' the Doctor mutters, looking desperately for cover. As he does so, the other two dogs quickly veer away, a low growl in their throats as they reassess you. At least they don't seem to realise you are now unarmed. At your feet, their brother lies motionless, the life slowly ebbing from its veins.

More cautious now, the two dogs move forwards again, forming a pincer with you and the Doctor in the middle. This time, you realise, you might not be so lucky.

'Jamie, look!' the Doctor whispers, pointing behind the dogs.

Some distance away you can see a tall, bearded stranger dressed in a dark uniform of some kind. You notice that in his hand he holds several leather straps. Leashes. Whoever he is, this man is in charge of the dogs.

'Hello!' the Doctor calls out to the stranger in the distance. 'Will you call your dogs off?' he shouts.

'There's no time for this, Doctor,' you whisper, hefting your blade. 'We have to get away. There's bound to be another way inside.'

- **If you decide to run off and look for another way in, go to section 4**

- **If you let the Doctor try to reason with the stranger, go to section 8**

- **If you buy the Doctor time to open the door by launching into a fight with the dogs, go to section 9**

– 12 –

After a short distance you arrive at a locked gate on the other side of which are two passageways. The first, which slopes up, is brightly lit and clearly marked with a colourful green stripe. The second descends into darkness.

Pulling out his sonic screwdriver, the Doctor quickly vibrates the lock, which springs open, allowing you to slowly force it open. As you do so, it creaks loudly, causing the Doctor to look furtively around to be sure you weren't spotted.

Unfortunately, he spots something and points. In the distance, you can see four bulky figures. Tall, brutish bald men with thickset foreheads and a dark grey pallor to their skin. Dressed in leather they jog towards you, armed with a variety of guns and batons.

'Ogrons,' the Doctor hisses.

- **If you stay and confront the Ogrons, go to section 13**

- **If you go through the gate and run along the well-lit corridor, go to section 14**

- **If you go through the gate and run along the dark corridor, go to section 16**

– 13 –

Shortly after he taught you to read, the Doctor lent you a series of picture books on which

you could practise. One of them had been the *I-Spyder Book of Monsters*, and its entry about Ogrons ran thus:

OGRON

Homo braahensis

Location: Braah and The Dalek Empire

As loyal as it is stupid, the Ogron is a bipedal mammal that walks upright. It is mainly hairless with rough grey skin. Despite being of non-terrestrial origin, the Ogron is classified both as a mammal and a hominid, having the highest testosterone level of any hominid species since *Homo neanderthalensis*, to whom it bears an uncanny resemblance. This is demonstrated by strong body odour, baldness, low brow ridges and high levels of emotional activity, aggression and a fondness for strong Rigellian ales.

Addendum

Despite its incredibly thick skull, the Ogron has a soft spot at the top of the cranium which leaves it vulnerable to brain surgery and psychological manipulation. The apparent stupidity of the species, coupled with its shock-resistant nervous system, has made it a favoured servitor race to the Daleks and other would-be galactic conquerors.

I-Spyder points value: 500

See also: Half-Ogrons, Ogron Lords and Pygmy Ogrons

Armed with such knowledge, you know the odds are stacked against you. Androgums are one thing, but Ogrons are quite another. Unable to deliver a solid blow to the top of the first Ogron's skull, you instead opt to plunge your dirk deep into the creature's stomach.

You feel tough layers of muscle resist our blow as a backhand blow from an oversized set of hairy knuckles sweeps you backwards and off your feet.

The last thing you remember is the crunching noise that fills your head as your skull crashes into the Institute door and blackness envelops you.

□ **Go to section 30**

–14 –

On the Doctor's instruction you turn to run away. As you do so you feel a burning sensation in the small of your back, and an instant later everything goes black.

For a long time, everything is dark, until you begin to see bright coloured spots before your eyes, and feel a tingling sensation in your fingers and toes.

'Jamie,' you can hear a familiar voice, 'wake up, Jamie.'

Slowly, your vision returns. It is blurred at first, but you can soon make out the shape of the Doctor leaning over you, and you can feel his hands gently patting your face.

'Wh – where am I?' you ask, blinking and looking around you. It is a small room with grey, grainy walls and a single slab-like door firmly closed from the other side. There is no handle.

'Just a cell,' he reassures you with an impish smile. 'Nothing we haven't got out of before.'

'What – ,' you begin, but the Doctor stays your question.

'You were stunned by a low level energy discharge,' he explains. 'You'll feel a little woozy but you'll be as right as rain in a few minutes.'

As you rub your sore head, the Doctor turns his attention to the cell door, pulling out a thin metal strip which he slides into the gap between the door and the wall. With an audible click, the door springs open, and the Doctor turns back to you, grinning.

'Shall we?'

∞

Following the Doctor outside, you find that you are in a dimly lit holding area that contains several locked cells just like yours.

□ **If you want to get away from the cell area as quickly as possible, go to section 15**

□ **If you haven't already freed the imprisoned local, and you want to search the other cells for him, go to section 18**

– 15 –

Closing the door to the cell area behind you, you are presented with a simple network of narrow corridors illuminated by uplighters set into the walls. Each of the three corridors ahead curves away in a different direction, and there is nothing to differentiate between them.

- **If you go right, go to section 2**
- **If you go left, go to section 19**
- **If you go straight ahead, go to section 27**

– 16 –

The darkness quickly envelops you as you descend, with only whispered banter between yourself and the Doctor to keep you going. The deeper you go the wider the tunnel seems to get, its walls stretching out of reach as the sound of dripping gets louder and louder. A skein of water appears at your feet, splashing with every step.

As the water gets deeper, you pause to get your bearings.

'Are you sure we're in the right place, Doctor?' you ask.

Silence is the reply.

'Doctor? Doctor...? DOCTOR...?'

∞

Alone in the dark, you sink to your knees. You are lost.

THE END

– 17 –

'Time to run again, Jamie,' the Doctor says, ducking into a side street.

'Wait for me, Doctor!' you shout, hastily following him as a crackling bolt of energy slams into the wall beside you. The Ogrons are armed.

'Don't worry, Jamie. This way!'

Ducking into another side street, the Doctor leads you on an intricate route through the settlement's side streets. Whatever path he's taking, he has you completely baffled.

'Doctor, wait! Where are we going?'

'It's all right, Jamie,' the Doctor says, pausing to catch his breath. 'I've worked out the layout of the street from the rose design. If I'm right…' he says, turning a corner, 'the Institute is... here.'

Directly ahead of you is the large central building which rises up to meet the apex of the dome. Across the street is an impressive doorway above which sits a smart black stone sign which says: The Wilmarth Institute of Advanced Xenomorphic Studies.

Go to section 11

– 18 –

'Doctor, remember what those workmen said in the bar?'

'What? Oh, yes. Their missing friends. Let's take a look, shall we?'

Moving over to the other cells, the Doctor starts using his metal strip to open the doors one by one. As he moves from door to door you push each one open, examining the cells. They are empty.

Opening the last door, the Doctor steps aside to let you in. Swinging the door open you see a man, tired and raggedly dressed, curled up in the corner of the cell.

'Hello?' you ask as he looks up, wild-eyed. 'Are ye all right?'

The man half-laughs, half cries with relief as he tries to stand on unsteady legs. Moving into the cell you help him to his feet.

'Excuse me, I'm a doctor,' says the Doctor, pulling out a penlight, 'and you are?'

'Sampson. Tomas Sampson.'

'Yes, yes,' says the Doctor, examining the man's eyes. He starts questioning him about how long he's been incarcerated and what food he's been given before asking about the other workman. 'Was Carl Millar with you?'

'Carl? Yes, he was... they took him away.'

'They? You mean the Ogrons?'

'Yes, and their leader the woman.'

'The Institute director, you mean?'

'I don't know,' Tomas replies, 'she could be, I suppose.'

'And what does she look like, this woman?'

'Tall, smart, mature, good looking; she wore a silk blouse with big shoulder pads, and she had long dark hair. She wears a big bracelet she uses to control everything.'

'Hmm.' The Doctor's face rumpled up in a frown. 'What did she sound like?'

'Like a bitch,' said Tomas.

'Well, I think you should get out of here as quickly as you can. Were you part of

the work detail on this place?'

Tomas nodded.

'Good, then you'll know the layout...'

 Go to section 15

–19 –

A pair of old-style fire extinguishers mark the point where the cold corridor floor gives way to plush multicoloured carpeting that shows pictures of mustachioed princes hunting beasts on horseback, while the stark lighting softens and arched patterns on the walls indicate that you have entered an altogether more luxurious part of the building.

Up ahead the corridor terminates with a large set of plush mahogany doors. Intricately carved with elephants and monkeys, they remind you of some carvings you'd seen on a box you'd once seen in the inn where you'd been billeted when Bonnie Prince Charlie seized Stirling three months before Culloden.

'Are these... Mughal?'

'Goodness, Jamie, yes...' says the Doctor, running his fingers over the carvings. 'Well, I'm not sure of the period but they're definitely Indian. Shall we...?'

Pushing open the door, the Doctor leads you into a lush green room. Like the corridor and door outside, it is covered in Indian motifs.

Of more interest, however, is the small congregation gathered in the middle of the room, some sipping drinks while others engage in translated conversation. From your adventures with the Doctor you think you may recognise a couple of them, but one of the creatures – a short, stubby four-armed box-like robot with a spiked, spherical head – is unmistakeable.

'Doctor, is that...?'

'Yes, Jamie. It's a Quark.'

Stepping forwards, the Doctor claps his hands together, a broad fake grin crossing his face as he offers a round of hellos, vigorously shaking hands and claws, patting shoulders and offering more unusual greetings to the assembled guests.

'I'm... Professor Yaffle,' he says, 'and this is my man... Hamish.'

Hamish? You wince, biting your tongue as the Doctor schmoozes. Intrigued by his conversation with the Quark, you hover close enough to overhear their conversation.

'I do hope I'm not too late,' he adds, slipping off his coat to expose a pair of garish braces acquired from his younger and altogether more colourful future self. The Doctor hands you his coat and shoos you away a little, offering a big wink as he turns to

engage with the Quark. 'And you would be...?'

<ambassador-c756-of-the-quark-fleet>

'Ambassador, you say? Quark Fleet, you say? So you've thrown off the shackles of Dominator oppression, claimed their fleet for your own and now you're here on Yuggoth again.'

<you-are-well-informed-professor-yaffle>

'Yes, well, the Quark-Darkling War was a specialist subject of mine. 1952 Earth-time. The Darkling hordes were defeated as the Quarks briefly occupied the planet. So why would you return?'

<we-are-here-for-the-auction>

'Ah, yes, the auction. I'm here for the auction too. What are you bidding for?'

<there-is-only-one-item>+<the-quarks-are-sponsors-not-bidders>

'Oh, I didn't realise. So the rest of us are all competitors? I do hope this drink hasn't been poisoned...'

'The chamber is protected by a field of temporal grace, Doctor.'

Doctor? Who... you turn to see the woman that just interrupted the Doctor's conversation with the Quark ambassador. She is just as Tomas Sampson had described, with a billowy silk shirt, long curvy black hair, piercing eyes framed by big, arched eyebrows, and deep red lips which form a bemused frown.

<you-are-the-doctor?> The Quark Ambassador shuffles backwards, unfolding its four arms which burn with light, ready to shoot him down in an instant.

'I'm sorry,' the Doctor bumbles, turning to face the lady who has just entered the room flanked by a pair of burly Ogron bodyguards, 'did you say temporal grace? That means...'

'Yes, Doctor, we're inside the atrium of my TARDIS.'

TARDIS? Stepping protectively in front of the Doctor, you confront the woman.

'Exactly who are you, lady?'

'It's alright, Jamie,' the Doctor says, stepping forwards. 'She's an old classmate of mine from Gallifrey. These days she calls herself... the Rani.'

☐ **Go to section 25**

– 20 –

'Well?' you ask impatiently.

Having navigated your way back to the TARDIS, you are shocked that the Doctor

didn't stop the Rani or the Quarks. The Daoctor *always* stops tyrants.

'I'm afraid the Rani wasn't breaking any rules,' the Doctor says at last, fidgeting with the TARDIS controls, 'but I was.'

'Rules?' You are confused. 'Since when did you care about rules?'

'Since you and I found the Quarks and their wasp army on Gano.'

'Gano? Aye, I remember that. We stopped the Quarks and the wasps then, so why not now?'

'Precisely because we already beat them.'

'Eh?'

'Some parts of time are fixed. One a Time Lord has seen and experienced it, an event is recorded by the repository of all Time Lord knowledge, the Matrix. It becomes part of the Web of Time. Unchangeable.'

'But that's Gano, not Pluto.'

'Don't you see, Jamie? We're in Gano's past. For the Quarks to invade Gano and be defeated they had to get the Rani to build them their army. She was making history happen the way that it should. While I don't approve of her methods, or the fact that she makes a tidy profit from the whole business, if I were to have stopped them the Invasion of Gano would have happened differently, do you see?'

'No... yes, yes.' You suddenly grasp the concept. 'Like when we first met, you were trying to keep out of the way so you didn't change history, even though you could have helped us beat the English.'

'Precisely, Jamie. The Invasion of Gano was a turning point in the evolution of the Quarks.'

The Doctor becomes animated as he explains. 'After Gano, every aggressive act the Quarks committed was flawed enough to fail, but unique enough to provide the lessons that led them to evolve. Ultimately they decide to start again in a time when they don't need to conquer to survive. They go back into the past – the Leptonic Era – to the time before time. The great structures and experiments they conduct will be mysteries for the rest of time. They'll be remembered by another name then – The Constructors of Destiny – and the universe itself will be their legacy.'

'All because of a few giant wasps?'

'I'm afraid so, Jamie,' the Doctor coughs a little as he pulls the dematerialization switch. 'I'm afraid so.'

THE END

– 21 –

'Whee!' the Doctor shouts, as he jumps and skips into the rock quarry. The lighter gravity makes jumping over obstacles much easier than normal, although you are still feeling a little queasy and in need of some time to acclimatise.

There aren't many workers around, and those that are seem to be far away, so nobody pays attention as you pick and jump your way across the pitted rocks and craters towards the other side of the quarry.

'Look!' you cry, as you can see a small road leading out of the quarry on its far side, 'the exit's over there, on the other side of those…'

Whoosh! You manage to roll to one side, as a plume of hot steam geysers upwards from one of the holes in the ground you were just about to mention. Bouncing on the ground you quickly end up back on your feet, barely grazed by your impact with the ground.

'Careful, Jamie,' the Doctor says, 'the amplified light from the dome has raised the temperature, melting some of the frozen gasses trapped beneath the surface.'

'Phew,' you gasp. Or should that be pooh. 'That stuff smells like…'

'Methane,' the Doctor explains, sparing you the embarrassment of describing the smell. 'Hardly enough to poison us, though, this artificial atmosphere needs a little pollution to make it more habitable. There'll be pumps and filters somewhere keeping the levels in balance.'

'Well, that's okay then,' you say, pressing onwards. Sometimes the Doctor's explanations can be a distraction. All you really need to know is what's safe and what's dangerous. Leading the way, you carefully avoid the other methane blowholes as you get closer and closer to the other side of the quarry. As you near the edge, you realise that the Doctor has fallen behind.

Turning to glance over your shoulder, you see the little man is running towards you. Behind you he is pursued by what appear to be two large guard dogs, snapping at his heels.

Meanwhile, the Doctor is mouthing something at you as he and his pursuers get closer and closer.

'Run, Jamie,' he is shouting. 'Run like the wind!'

- **If you follow the Doctor's instructions, and run towards the nearest settlement, go to section 3**

- **If you try to draw the dogs away from the Doctor, running in another direction, go to section 4**

☐ **If you make a stand and fight the creatures to save your friend, go to section 5**

– 22 –

'Oh dear, oh dear,' the Doctor mutters, pushing aside the scattered delegates as the two remaining wasps squeeze through the broken perspex to circle above their fallen nest-mate.

Without your dirk, you are helpless, and the wasps have the Doctor and the other delegates trapped in a corner of the room too far away to reach the door. As you watch you see the first delegate – Dom Quarn, the walking pineapple – collapse upon receiving an impaling sting from the foremost wasp.

'Run, Jamie,' the Doctor instructs you, muttering something about the corridor outside.

☐ **If you stay to fight off the wasps, go to section 23**

☐ **If you follow the Doctor's instructions and run, go to section 26**

– 23 –

Unarmed, you throw yourself forwards, catching the neatest wasp – the one that just struck down Dom Quarn – by grasping its wings. You feel a satisfying tear as your weight pulls the creature to the ground, crushing it as you land on top of the monstrosity.

Unfortunately, this leaves you exposed to the last wasp, which strikes from behind, stabbing you in the back so that its sting penetrates your chest.

'Jamie!' you hear the Doctor scream as the pain of the sting burns into you and, moments later, anaphylaxis overwhelms you. The tissue of your heart and lungs swell as your wound bleeds out and your life is mercifully cut short as you hear the Rani saying something about the Temporal Grace setting.

☐ **Go to section 30**

– 24 –

The one constant in your adventures with the Doctor has been the need to run away from danger. For such a little man, the Doctor has always been incredibly fast on his feet, and now, as on many occasions, you race away from your enemies.

Ducking through winding streets and nameless alleys, you shake off your pursuers, and soon find yourselves lost.

Pausing for breath, you stop on the edge of a main thoroughfare, and the Doctor starts mumbling to himself.

'Let me see. 23rd century, prototype domed city, Pluto. This has to be built to one of Fletcher's designs. Macintosh rose with a centrepoint visible from all main routes into the settlement. So…' he steps out onto the thoroughfare, pausing to look in both directions, 'the Wilmarth Institute is this way! Follow me, Jamie.'

☐ **Go to section 11**

– 25 –

The Rani smiles coolly at the Doctor as she addresses the assembled guests.

'If you'll excuse us, the Doctor and I have some unfinished business. Gwarn and Garrack will escort you to the demonstration room, where the auction will begin shortly.'

The two Ogrons corral the guests, guiding them to a doorway at the far end of the room. One of them – Garrack – comes across to guide you away with the others, but his mistress ushers him away as the Doctor points out that you are with him.

'I'm rather fond of boys myself,' she says, looking you up and down with eyes that seem to be undressing you.

'I'm no boy,' you snap, reaching for your dirk.

'Jamie, Jamie,' the Doctor calms you, 'let's not be hasty. Put your knife away.'

'Alright,' you say, throwing an angry look in the Rani's direction. 'So this is the Time Lord that's breaking the rules...'

'Breaking the rules? I'd heard you were travelling the universe in a police box these days, Doctor, but I didn't know you'd been signed up as the High Council's errand boy. I always thought you were a bit of a rebel.'

'Yes, well, it's just a temporary arrangement.'

'Arrangement? What sort of arrangement? Jobs for TARDIS parts? Or did they find out what you did to Chancellor Wittering's portable wardrobe?'

'Not exactly. I wasn't exiled like you, and leaving Gallifrey without the right paperwork has hefty consequences.'

'So they sent you after me? I'm a scientist, not a... time meddler.'

'So what is it you're auctioning to the highest bidder?'

'Nothing illegal. Just weapons.'

'Weapons? What kind? Staser cannons? Mantric bombs? Time torpedoes?'

'Don't be ridiculous, Doctor. Selling Gallifreyan technology would be illegal. I'm running a legitimate, contemporary, historically appropriate business. And as an exile I can't be held accountable for integrating myself into galactic society.'

'Selling weapons out of an academic institute?'

'A licensed academic institute. I have the paperwork.'

'It's morally wrong.'

'But ethically right. Even the Web of Time depends on what I'm doing.'

'It does? How?'

'I'll tell you what. You can see for yourself. Be my guest at the auction, and you can see the weapon being demonstrated. If you find me in breach of any Gallifreyan laws I'll happily close down my operation and move on.'

The Doctor frowns, turning to you. 'What do you think, Jamie?'

'I think it stinks. Weapons kill, whoever sells them, and then there's the dogs, and the guards, and the missing workmen.'

'Yes,' the Doctor concedes your point, 'what about the imprisonment of Tomas Sampson and Carl Millar?'

'The workmen? They were trespassing. This *is* a private facility. One of them was hurt – he's being treated. The other is being held until the auction is over. They'll be released.

- **If the Doctor rejects the offer, go to section 28**

- **If the Doctor accepts the Rani's deal, go to section 29**

– 26 –

Of course! The corridor!

Breaking away from the wasps, you run outside, through the ornately decorated waiting room and the double doors, out of the Rani's TARDIS and into the Institute. There, just as you remember, you find a fire extinguisher.

Returning to the demonstration room moments later, you arrive just in time to find the Doctor keeping the wasps at bay with his sonic screwdriver.

With a great heave, you swing the fire extinguisher into the first wasp, batting it away where it smashes against the nearby perspex with a sickening crunch. As it falls to the floor you deliver a coup de grace, flattening its head, and its eyes, and breaking its antennae.

As the second wasp shifts its attention to you, the Doctor throws his coat onto

it, causing it to fall just as its nest-mate had done moments earlier. Like a matador, the Doctor pulls back his coat to allow you to deliver the killing blow to the head of the third and final wasp.

<kill-the-doctor> says the Quark, shuffling forwards.

'No, leave them,' the Rani says, ushering the Quark ambassador away. 'The Doctor and his companion will be leaving now, won't you, Doctor?'

'Yes, yes, we will,' he says sheepishly. 'Come along, Jamie, it's time we were going.'

'I don't unnerstand...' you begin. 'We have tae stop them.'

'No, not this time. I'll explain later. Rani,' he nodded to his fellow Time Lord, 'Ambassador, delegates, farewell.'

☐ **Go to section 20**

– 27 –

As you walk down the corridor you soon see long shadows up ahead: Ogron guards are patrolling the Institute.

☐ **If you decide to square off against the Ogrons, go to section 13**

☐ **If you decide to double back to pick one of the other corridors go to section 19**

– 28 –

'This is preposterous,' says the Doctor, 'there's no way I can agree to that! You must be stopped. It's a matter of principle...'

'Very well, Doctor,' says the Rani, reaching down and pulling four white cards from inside her boot, 'then you'll force me to summon the Time Lords. I'm sure they'll be interested in hearing how you plan to break the laws of time to defeat me.'

'What laws? The Time Lords sent me...'

'Trust me, Doctor, you interfere and causality will shatter as a fixed point in history unhinges, and you delete a large part of your personal timestream following your precious principles.'

'Ah,' the Doctor frowns, thrusting his hands deep into his pockets. 'You're serious, aren't you?'

'Deadly,' the Rani replies.

'Oh well, lead on then.'

□ **Go to section 2**

– 29 –

'Very well,' the Doctor agrees to the Rani's suggestion, 'I'll take you at your word and see your demonstration. But I warn you, I don't answer to the laws of Gallifrey, I answer to my conscience. I'll make my own judgements on the matter.'

□ **Go to section 2**

– 30 –

You died:

Here lies James Robert McCrimmon
Loyal to the last

The Doctor stands solemnly in front of your grave.

'You were a good man, Jamie. This shouldn't have happened.'

He tosses a small black circuit at the foot of the headstone. Were you alive, you would recognise it as the slave circuit used to keep the Doctor and his TARDIS under control.

'I've decided to run away again. I might even regenerate to throw the Time Lords off the scent. But I promise you this, my boy. I'll find a way to undo this. Even if it means yet another trial.'

THE END

Requiescat

William Andrews

I saw Craig Hinton at both of the Panopticon conventions I attended in Coventry near to where he, like I, grew up. What I remember about those appearances was that Craig was always smiling, always mingling, and always willing to talk at great length about his passions regardless of whom we were. Some of his peers were snobbish and distant by comparison, but Craig didn't give a damn.

After a few minutes he gave me his email, which I always to use but never did. What I did do, because he was so nice, was to go out of my way to find and read his books. I was an instant fan. Few other Doctor Who *writers really stood out to me, but a Craig Hinton book was instantly recognisable, and besides the continuity he was infamous for, his prose always had a sense of fun, exuberance and a hint of sauciness about it.*

As for my story, well it has as Craig-like a title I can muster, some fun continuity, and a touch of the Cthulhu Mythos.

Tread lightly, she is near
Under the snow,
Speak gently, she can hear
The daisies grow.

All her bright golden hair
Tarnished with rust,
She that was young and fair
Fallen to dust.

Lily-like, white as snow,
She hardly knew
She was a woman, so
Sweetly she grew.

Coffin-board, heavy stone,
Lie on her breast,
I vex my heart alone,
She is at rest.

Peace, peace, she cannot hear
Lyre or sonnet,
All my life's buried here,
Heap earth upon it.

- Oscar Wilde

The crypt stood in a remote, concave col connected to the rest of the valley by a crack in the mountainside that had once carried ice from the mountain col down to where the river bisected the tundra far below. Dwarfed by a voluminous fur coat held in place by a short piece of rope, the Doctor ignored the guns that were trained on him as he appealed for his captor to listen to reason.

'You really don't want to do that,' the Doctor urged, shuffling awkwardly on his feet, tramping chaotic footprints in the snow. 'I beg of you,' he persisted, a pleading tone in his voice, 'leave her alone.'

'I don't know who you are or where you came from, Doctor,' said Richards, the team's leader, 'but we've come a long way for this. It took four years for me to arrange this expedition, it cost our sponsors thousands of mazumas, and it's taken more red tape than a year's output from the silk snakes of Cestis Six to get me here. Your objection is noted, and duly ignored.'

Turning back to face the crypt, Richards nodded towards his cutting crew, who responded by activating the thermal lance. A thin beam of brilliant light cut into the seals that held the crypt's door shut, and the hiss of vaporising rock competed with the howling winds that filled the area.

'You don't understand,' the Doctor stuttered. 'Vorlana wasn't a pirate queen, she was a circus performer who ended up captain of her own ship, and she certainly wasn't buried with any treasure. She died sacrificing her life so that the rest of her crew could live.'

'Really?' Richards paused, although his cutting crew did not. 'And you have evidence of this? I've been the galaxy's foremost Vorlana historian for more than thirty years, Doctor. I've visited every site, examined every artefact, read every text and record that's known to exist, and none of what you say is corroborated.'

'That's all second hand stuff, rewritten by enemies who outlived her,' the Doctor said dismissively. 'I've conducted primary research, Doctor Richards. I was there when it happened.'

'Of course you were, Doctor, because every pirate queen travels with a crackpot

scientist who can live for more than a thousand years.'

With a muted clang, whatever locking mechanism lay beyond the crypt fell away on the other side of the door.

'It's open, sir,' the cutters reported.

'Excellent. Well, Doctor, you're too late. It's open now.'

'Listen to me,' the Doctor urged, 'that crypt was locked from the inside. It's a trap!'

'Good point,' said Richards, stepping aside from the door and indicating that one of his men should open it. As the man did so, the doors exploded outwards in a cloud of dust and stale air.

'Oh, no!' the Doctor muttered, tearing himself away from the party and running blindly towards the crevasse that led down to the valley, and to the TARDIS. Oblivious to the guns that may well been pointing at his back, he half-ran and half-dived through the gap as he felt and heard the wave of energy that erupted from Vorlana's tomb, searing his coat fur as it propelled him through the air and onto the snowy slopes where he rolled and stumbled, gathering clumps of fresh, sticky snow as he careened down the mountainside.

Behind him the explosion destroyed the entire mountain-top, leaving behind a smouldering crater where the charred and scattered remains of Richards and his archaeological expedition drifted on the mountain breeze.

In their place, where the crypt had stood, was a slavering, ravenous beast whose faintly glowing silhouette may well have resembled that of a rabbit-eared racing dog, but whose size was much closer to that of a small horse, except for the hindquarters whose powerful leg muscles made the creature look more like a giant marsupial.

Vorpal teeth glinted as they dripped corrosive saliva to the ground, and cybernetic eyes twinkled as the scabrous and unwholesome creature sniffed the air and processed what it found there.

Time Lord.

It howled.

Stumbling to his feet the Doctor squeezed his hands over his ears lest the chilling scream paralyse his nervous system. His eyes darted wildly across the landscape as he tried to orient himself, to find the TARDIS.

There.

Maybe two hundred yards away the TARDIS sat, slightly tilted by its recent landing on a nearby snowdrift. Without even a glance over his shoulder, the Doctor bounded for the battered blue box he hoped might be his salvation.

As he closed the gap plumes of snow and ice erupted around him as the creature's eyes unleashed bolts of sickly green energy in an attempt to thwart his escape. Hopping

and jumping from side to side, the Doctor avoided the glowing craters filled with chronon radiation that the eyebolts left in their wake.

'Key, key,' he mumbled, fumbling around in his pockets as time itself began to warp and weave around him. As he closed upon the TARDIS, he closed his eyes, reaching out with his mind to feel the flow of time around him, to anticipate the safest route through the cloud of temporal pollution that his pursuer had unleashed.

The key slipped into the lock, and the Doctor followed. The TARDIS door clicked securely behind him and he opened his eyes and breathed a momentary sigh of relief.

Then the door shook.

'What?'

Then it shook again. This time the vibrations were accompanied by a deep screeching sound similar, but louder, to that of nails running down a blackboard.

'Oh my giddy…'

By the third shake the Doctor had crossed over to his ship's control, his fingers reaching for whatever instruments his subconscious mind deemed helpful. An image of the creature appeared on the scanner, its metallic claws were gouging out large chunks of the ship's outer shell, while its mighty lungs expelled a cone of green plasma much like a mythical dragon. Data scrolled across the screen and mauve warning symbols flashed, bathing the room with an eerie pink glow.

'What,' the Doctor wondered, 'is that?'

The door shook again.

Activating HADS – the ship's Hostile Action Displacement System, the Doctor scrunched up his eyes and waited.

For a fifth time the door shook. And then the cloister bell tolled.

'Ah.'

Opening his eyes, the Doctor deactivated HADS, much good that it had done, and noted the "hull breach imminent" warning that now replaced the creature's image on the monitor screen.

'I know,' he muttered, divesting himself of the fur coat and pulling out a spotted hankie to mop his brow, 'I'll dislocate the exterior from the interior. Yes, that should do it.'

His fingers dancing across the controls, the Doctor entered a final sequence of code before bracing himself for the sixth and final impact, flicking a switch at the instant the door buckled and a slavering monster crossed the threshold uninvited.

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Moments later it was gone, and in its place a blanket of white could be seen through the open doorway. For a few moments, as the Doctor returned to the controls to complete his calculations, the TARDIS interior was in a state of limbo, suspended in a blank dimension with no access to the universe beyond. Then, flicking back the switch he had used to banish the beast and the exterior, a new outer shell appeared, its doors closed and intact, its décor slightly different, but not incongruous.

'There,' he wiped the handkerchief across the controls and patted them, as if rewarding the TARDIS for its responsiveness. 'And it still seems to be a police box. I hope that doesn't mean I have no imagination in years to come.'

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Another day, another TARDIS.

'The King has entered the building,' the Doctor said in his best Elvis voice. Humming a bar or two of '*Viva, Las Vegas*', the white jump-suited Doctor sashayed into the console room. Half singing and half dancing, he followed a hip-bump to the left with a heel-spin that brought him square on to the coordinate programmer. He adjusted the tumbler barrels in time with his singing, selected the time, place and era he wanted before shimmying over to the dematerialisation switch and pulling it down with a flourish.

The cloister bell responded with a resounding clang.

'What?'

The Doctor turned in time to see the TARDIS door buckle and fly inwards.

'What?'

A slavering, emaciated monster burst into the console room, propelled into the air by its powerful hind legs. Its tooth-filled jaw and glowing green eyes locked onto the Time Lord as it bounded towards him. Moving straight into a forward roll the Doctor's temporary quiff brushed against the creature's underbelly as it passed overhead.

Finding his feet, the Doctor placed his latest acquisition, a Louis XV Bergere chair between himself and the beast. Tilting it backwards and hefting it upwards, he pointed its ornate cabriole legs towards it.

'Nice doggy,' he muttered as the creature turned, its skeletal flame rippling translucently under the room's artificial light. Behind it, on the control console, an alarm pinged. Moments later a blue-grey tinted image flickered into life. A hologram.

'*Hello?*' it said, speaking to empty space. It was a head. His head. The second one with the frown and the Beatle mop. It turned, spotting the creature that stood between them. *'Ah,'* he continued, *'I'm late.'*

'What are you doing here?' the Doctor asked, shouting over the creature's

growls.

'*I was supposed to warn you,'* said the other Doctor, *'but, um, I seem to have mistimed my appearance. Nice hairstyle, by the way.'*

'Thanks, I…' the Doctor began, '… never mind that! What's going on?'

'*My fault,'* the hologram smiled sheepishly. *'Give me a moment, and when I say run… you know the drill.'*

As he spoke the image shifted, the head switching to a full-torso image. The Doctor was short, dressed in baggy trousers and some equally baggy shirtsleeves held together by a pair of dark braces. In his hand was a spotted handkerchief.

'*Oi, you!'* he said, jumping up and down whilst waving his arms and the hankie furiously. 'Yah, yah!'

The creature turned, snapping at the air before unleashing a burst of green flame that washed over the console and briefly obscured the image. As it did so, the Doctor swung the Bergere chair, releasing it to fly across the room and hit his attacker in its flanks.

As the cabriole legs splintered against the creature's side the Doctor ran for the archway that led into the bowels of the TARDIS. Cursing himself for not adding a closable door to its décor, he dodged and weaved his way through its old stone corridors looking for the best place to take refuge.

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Behind him he could sense the creature, no longer distracted by his clownish predecessor. He imagined its hot breath on his neck as he plunged through a double doorway and into the central hub of his ship.

The Cloisters.

Disturbing the bats and butterflies with the sound of his footsteps the Doctor half-skipped, half-stumbled down the stone steps. He paused, looking around the room for somewhere to go. Up in the galleries? Under the arches? Behind the Eye of Harmony?

'Yes!' he muttered, dashing across the chamber.

There, behind the Eye, was a stone manhole cover embossed with the Seal of Rassilon. Crouching down, the Doctor reached down, slipping his fingers into the grooves of its curlicues until he felt the satisfying click that preceded the grating sideward movement of the cover, revealing a slim shaft which led down into another room.

Dropping down and replacing the cover, the Doctor slid down the shaft, ignoring the hand and footholds carved into its sides. Some twenty feet down he fell into a small dimly lit white chamber. As he struck the floor, the TARDIS responded to his presence by increasing the level of light and revealing the familiar shape of the secondary console

room. It was smaller and more compact than the current model, although the combination of mahogany and brass reflected his current taste for Vernian architecture.

Reaching forwards, the Doctor grasped the double knife switch used to reroute power from the primary console. As he threw it, a simpler version of the power column began to rise and fall, exposing a faux clockwork movement whose brass cogs and flywheels were stirred into action. Moving to a different panel, the Time Lord pushed down on its mahogany surface, flipping it over to replace a panel of tumblers and toggles with an altogether more Heath Robinson affair. Cranking its handle a few times, the Doctor teased the contraption into life. Blue-grey light flickered as the holographic head of the second Doctor coalesced, turning to observe the glass column that slowly rose from the centre of the console. Spinning brass flywheels and rotating cogs ticked and ground as power and control were diverted to the Doctor's fingertips.

'*Excellent,'* said the second Doctor's head as it looked around the room, *'I like it.'*

'I'll give you excellent,' the cat-suited Doctor grumbled. 'I'm all shook up! You were my favourite me until you pulled this stunt. Would you care to explain what's going on?'

Sheepishly, the other Doctor looked up from beneath his dark grey fringe.

'*Well,'* he began, *'the Time Lords sent me on a mission. Entirely against my better judgement, you understand.'*

'And…?'

'Do you remember Vorlana?'

'Yes, yes, a sweet child who got in with the wrong sort. It's tragic what happened to her.'

'So, you remember how she died?'

'Of course, we were there. She went down with her ship after a mutiny by one of her crew.'

'*The Terrible Zodin, yes,'* the second Doctor nodded, *'and her body?'*

'Well… it would have been eroded and scattered by the time winds.'

'Precisely. So you can imagine my surprise when the Time Lords sent me to prevent an archaeological expedition from opening the Tomb of Vorlana.'

'Her tomb?' The Elvis-Doctor frowned, 'Why don't I remember any of this?'

'*Had any blows to the head recently?'* his counterpart asked. *'Or perhaps the Time Lords are going to cover it up?'*

'Well, what's Vorlana got to do with "Thumper" in there?'

'*I failed,'* the other Doctor hung his head. *'The Time Lords didn't give me enough time to establish myself, and instead of Vorlana and her treasure the expedition found "Thumper" waiting for them instead.'*

'You were caught in a trap?'

'Yes. I had to think quickly. It followed me and smashed down the door of the TARDIS.'

'It did what?' The TARDIS exterior was meant to be practically indestructible. 'How?'

'I'm not sure. The creature appears to be of higher dimensional origin, and its cybernetic enhancements seem tailored to the destruction of time active foes. The claws suggest its entire skeleton has been laced with validium, and the breath weapon seems like a rather elaborate abuse of kontron crystals.'

'Someone went to rather a lot of effort, then.'

'*Yes,'* the hologram agreed. *'My outer shell was fatally compromised so I decided to swap it with yours.'*

'Yes,' the Doctor raised an irritated eyebrow, 'thanks for that.'

'Well I did try and warn you! My message was meant to arrive before it tore into your ship. I expected the creature to age to death or be blown off course by the vortex.'

'Nice try, and ten out of ten for creative thinking under pressure, but who would have sent it? And why use Vorlana?'

'*Only one member of Vorlana's crew hated us enough to set a trap like this,*' the older Doctor explained, *'and she does have a penchant for breeding odd pets.'*

'Zodin?'

'*Seems likely,'* the second Doctor nodded.

'Well, it beats performing grasshoppers, I suppose. So how do we deal with the little beastie?'

'I was rather hoping you'd remember the encounter and have something ready.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'If Zodin's involved, my ignorance is probably down to the mind rubber.'

'*Mind rubber?'* The holographic Doctor looked aghast.

'Never mind,' he said, realising he had started to breach one of the laws of time. 'Too much information. Let's take a closer look at "Thumper", shall we?'

Turning back to the console, the Doctor activated the large flat monitor screen that filled an adjacent wall. Adjusting the brightness and contrast controls, he brought the blurred image of the cloisters into sharp focus.

'*Ah,'* said the second Doctor.

Inside the cloisters the strange creature had run amok. Deep claw-marks were gouged into the stone sphere that protected the Eye of Harmony, and several ornate columns had been reduced to rubble by the creature's rampage. Broken brickwork and strands of vandalised ivy were scattered all over the place.

'That was my favourite shrubbery!' the Doctor complained, as the creature unleashed a cone of green plasma into one of the arched cloisters.

'*At least he hasn't found us yet,'* the other Doctor said sympathetically.

'Without a telepathic link with the TARDIS that's unlikely,' said the Doctor. 'I've detached us from the TARDIS superstructure, so our only links with the rest of the ship are…'

'*The dimensional conduits!'* Doctor Two interjected, *'Of course!'*

'What?'

'*That creature,'* the other Doctor explained, *'it's a mutant. But underneath it all, it's a geāst!'*

'A what?'

'*A geāst! A time wraith. Second cousins to the dvora. Look, the dog's head with no nose, the scabs, and the phosphorescent glow. Once you've half-starved it, added all the cybernetic extras and exposed it to high levels of chronon radiation…'*

'Yes,' the Doctor agreed. 'I suppose it would look like that. But that means it can cross dimensional barriers.'

Precisely! It uses transdimensional telepathy, which means that with enough time it will be able to sense you…'

'But there's only one dimensional bridge between us and it… once the geāst works out where we are, it can get to us through the dimensional conduit…'

'*Humph,'* the second Doctor muttered, stifling a cough, *'as if I hadn't already worked that out for you. You have to shut it down. It means abandoning the rest of the TARDIS, but that creature will be trapped forever in a pocket dimension with no power and no means of escape.'*

'No, I'm not jettisoning most of the TARDIS like that. There has to be another way…. Wait. What if I divert the conduit to another location while the geāst is in transit?'

'*Oh, yes,'* the second Doctor agreed. *'I'm brilliant!'*

'Thank you,' the Doctor replied, playing with the ship's controls. 'All I need to do is extend the ship's telepathic matrix along the conduits and the geāst will sense us. Right,' he said, flipping a toggle, 'here goes!'

Inside the cloisters, the creature paused, tilting its head and raising it much like a dog sniffing the air. Except, of course, that this dog had no nose.

'*It's working,'* the second Doctor said excitedly.

As they watched, the creature started to glow brightly, its phosphorescent skin becoming a ball of bright green death-fire.

'It's shifting,' said the Doctor as the creature began to fade away. 'We have to time this just right… one slight miscalculation and I won't be getting any more lives.'

'*It's in the conduit,'* the other Doctor said. *'Now!'*

'No,' the Doctor held back, watching the instruments on his console, 'just a moment longer.'

'*Are you mad?'* Fear and alarm spread across the holographic Doctor's face. *'Look! It's appearing!'*

In the centre of the room, in mid air, the phosphorescent green image of the geāst began to emerge. First the glowing eyes became visible, then the blank face with gnashing teeth and long ears, then powerful shoulders and sharp-clawed forelimbs, and then…

'Now!' The Doctor flipped a toggle, rerouting the conduit. As he did so, the creature screamed before the sound, abruptly, was cut off. A moment later the solid front half of the creature fell to the floor, neatly cut in half by the flick of a switch.

'*What?'* the Second Doctor looked incredulous, scanning the floor for any sign of the creature's hind parts. Slowly, his face erupted into a grin. *'You killed it!'*

'I couldn't compound what we did,' said the Doctor, who didn't share his counterpart's relief. 'That poor creature was enslaved, experimented on, mutated and then trapped in time by our TARDISes for more than five hundred years. If we'd diverted it alive to any other time and place who knows what havoc it might have caused? It was a mercy killing.'

'*So,'* the other Doctor asked, replacing his smile with a more sombre face, *'where did you send the hindquarters?'*

'Returned to sender,' he said. 'Zodin's Pleasure Palace on Zymymys Midamor. Halfway through one of her matinee performances.'

'Oh dear. She won't be best pleased.'

'Well,' the Doctor said, inputting the codes that would reattach the secondary console room to the TARDIS superstructure, 'I'll leave you to sort that one out.'

'Oh, thanks.'

'Well, you have the Time Lords on your side. They used you, so why don't you turn the tables and use them?'

'*Yes,'* the second Doctor frowned, *'yes, I suppose I could, couldn't I? Do you want to come along?'*

'Nu-huh,' the Doctor curled his lip, smoothed out his quiff and adjusted his white jewelled collar. 'I have free tickets for the Las Vegas Elvis-a-Rama. But a couple of the others might be interested.'

'*Ah well, I'd best be going then.'* The hologram faded as somewhere else in time and space, the Second Doctor closed down the link. As his face faded, his final words echoed around the chamber. *'I'll give the Terrible Zodin your kindest regards.'*

O'KEARLE

Relative Dimensions

Andrew Cheverton

This story comes from the aspiration to take some of the elements that I think work in the modern Doctor Who *series – while avoiding all those that patently don't – and to employ them within the fabric of the show I remember loving as a child. And then to weave in all the elements of continuity that make* Doctor Who *the show it is, as well as the type of real science fiction concepts that the show used to throw away like confetti. My exposure to Craig has been through this project; my wish is that this is the sort of story he'd have enjoyed.*

Hanging in this almost starless expanse of space, the ship unfurls the glittered iridescence of its scoop-sails to catch the passing radiation of a nearby sun. This captured energy pulses lazily down the sails and into the main body of the vessel, pulses like blood through the veins of insect wings. A human observer would liken the ship to the curled body of a shrimp held aloft by dragonfly wings, the entire thing constructed from oiled copper and stained glass. From its body, tiny sensor filaments extrude, waving like underwater grasses in their methodical search for signal and information. During this operation, the entire craft rotates, spiralling almost imperceptibly around its vertical axis; glints of starlight and flashes of superheated radiation reflect from its every intricate surface and are gone, to be replaced by more and yet more.

There is a tireless hum – so faint that it may have been there all along – which builds on itself and then, slowly, like some strange creature sinking down into inky water, the alien ship turns more rapidly on its axis, a graceful parting pirouette, and vanishes from sight, both visual and mechanical, as it wraps the fabric of space around itself like a magician's cloak.

Then it is gone.

Supercharged ions continue their eternal trajectories in the space the beautiful ship leaves behind, and there's an ultrasonic background sound, far beyond organic perception: the sweet high tone of the universe as it sings to itself.

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'And *that*, my dear, was a Voivod warpship.'

Zoë Herriot continued to stare at the wall-mounted viewscreen for some moments.

'That was incredible, Doctor.' She wore a white vinyl knee-length dress patterned with random black squares, worn over black flat-soled boots, and she practically danced her way to the Doctor's side, resting her palms on the edge of the console.

'What we saw, of course,' the Doctor went on, 'was only the *visible* portion of a much larger and more intricate craft that exists outside of this space – a dimensional proxy, if you will.' Already he had wandered away from Zoë's side and was now making yet more of his seemingly unending adjustments to the controls on the TARDIS's console.

'The energy transfer ratio to use simple solar radiation for even partial extra-dimensional navigation must be almost incalculable,' Zoë said.

The Doctor continued to adjust dials and experiment with levers. He looked up at her from beneath his shaggy fringe, his eyes managing to sparkle in the shade of his dark hair.

'My dear Zoë,' he said, 'there is nothing which is incalculable.' His mouth turned up in a playful smile. 'At least, as far as I've found.'

He moved around to join her, taking both of her hands in his. 'I'm glad you liked it.'

'Oh, I *did*. The solar sails were unlike anything I've ever seen before.' She clasped his hands tightly. 'If only we could have sneaked onboard.'

'Ah, well, that's easier said than done, even for a TARDIS. They're very secretive, the Voivod, on the rare occasions they enter this dimensional space. Even *I* don't know what they actually look like.'

'I wish Jamie could have seen it.'

'Yes, well, I can't really be expected to entertain both of you at once,' the Doctor replied somewhat testily. 'Speaking of Jamie, I hope he hasn't lost himself in the TARDIS. The room I chose for his bagpipe practice was as far from the console room as I could possibly –'

They both turned at the high-pitched alarm coming from the TARDIS's console.

The Doctor dropped Zoë's hands and shuffled around the hexagonal control panel to where a red light was flashing in time with the alarm. He stared down at it intently, putting his hands behind his back and leaning forward a little, a look of bemusement on his face. He moved around the console a little farther and pressed a button; the viewscreen went dark and a panel slid across it so that it was lost among the many roundels that covered the walls.

'Doctor, what is it?' asked Zoë.

He wandered back around to the alarm, then he looked at Zoë. His face betrayed a look of disquiet that she hadn't seen before.

'It's a distress call,' he said. His brow furrowed, bringing his dark eyebrows down over his eyes like storm clouds over a setting sun.

'Where is it coming from?'

'That's the thing. It's coming from another TARDIS.'

'*Another* TARDIS? How can that be?'

'Later, my dear,' the Doctor said, as he made some final adjustments to the console and the translucent pillar of the Time Rotor began its ascending and descending motion.

'I'd hold on to something, if I were you,' the Doctor advised. 'This, I'm afraid, is going to be even more bumpy than usual.'

Zoë braced herself against the edge of the console as the familiar sound of straining metal lungs filled the room and the floor lurched alarmingly to one side and then back again. 'Do you know where we're going? Whose distress signal are we responding to?'

'Good questions, Zoë; it's excellent to see that you always keep thinking.'

Zoë looked around the Time Rotor at the Doctor. 'Does that mean that I'm going to get an answer?'

The floor righted itself abruptly and the Rotor came to a gradual, wheezing stop. The Doctor released his grip on the console and pulled sharply on the lapels of his jacket in an attempt to tidy himself. With his oversized shirt and shapeless trousers, it was a somewhat futile effort.

'Haven't got time at the moment, my dear,' he said. 'Please run an environmental check for me, would you?' He pressed the button that activated the viewscreen, which once again slid open and resolved into a picture of the new location surrounding the TARDIS.

Outside was a barren, almost featureless expanse of sand and rock, baking under the unremitting, twinned gaze of two large yellow suns. The Doctor adjusted the parameters of the screen and initiated a 360 degree sweep, eventually coming to rest on a set of stone blocks and pillars some hundred feet away from the TARDIS. It looked like an ancient ruin whose pale, sun-bleached blocks leaned lazily against each other or flat on the ground, apart from one which seemed to have escaped the collapse suffered by the others, standing to one side by itself.

After checking the instrumentation, Zoë circled the console to stand beside the Doctor. 'It looks safe enough out there: the nearest settlement's almost seven kilometres away,' she reported. 'The air's breathable and uncontaminated and there's no harmful radiation.'

The Doctor did not answer her; his gaze remained fixed on the pile of ruins on the viewscreen.

'Doctor?' Zoë asked.

He jumped a little, as if surprised to see her. 'I've not been here before. No idea where we are, in fact,' he said, as if in answer to a completely different enquiry.

'Safe to go out, then?' he continued. 'I think you should stay here. I'll be fine by myself.'

'By yourself? Won't you need any help? You don't know what's out there.'

'Well, I shall take my umbrella,' he said, withdrawing one with a flourish from the nearby coat stand. 'To keep the sun off.'

'But, Doctor-'

Zoë's protests were interrupted by a harsh buzzing from the viewscreen. The external image vanished in a field of static that danced as the speaker beneath broadcast a new audio signal into the console room.

<i-den-tify-your-self>

The Doctor stepped forward and puffed up his chest in front of the screen. 'To whom am I speaking?'

<I-DEN-TIFY> the voice repeated.

'I've come in response to a distress signal.'

<I-DEN-TIFY>

The Doctor turned to Zoë. 'This isn't getting us anywhere, is it?' he said.

He looked quizzically at the still-flashing alarm light on the console. 'Perhaps I've somehow misinterpreted the signal... it looked very much like an automatic TARDIS distress call. How else would *our* TARDIS have followed the beacon?'

He returned his gaze to the viewscreen and placed his index finger along the length of his nose, rubbed his bottom lip with the knuckle of his middle finger.

'I don't understand this at all,' he mused.

'Doctor,' Zoë interrupted, 'aren't we going to go and offer our help?'

'I don't know, Zoë – there's something a little odd about this. TARDISes don't usually use automated communicators. Especially impatient ones.'

The viewscreen sounded again: <vis-ual-scan-con-firmed>+<you-are-the-doctor>

'My goodness, how did they manage that?' asked the Doctor. He rapped on the screen with the handle of his umbrella. 'I say, identify yourself this instant!'

The screen resolved itself into a discernable image: that of a large room in which angular shapes milled around. Alarmed, the Doctor took several steps back, not stopping until he had walked backwards into the sharp edge of the TARDIS's console.

Zoë moved to gain a clearer look at the strangely familiar image on the screen.

'Doctor,' she asked, 'is that a TARDIS control room?'

'Yes, Zoë, it is.' The Doctor's face had fallen in shock.

Zoë pointed her finger at the image. 'And those – are they...?'

'Yes,' he said gravely as he turned to her, all traces of mischievous adventure drained from his face. 'Those are Daleks.'

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On the screen, the Daleks moved purposefully around the other TARDIS's console room. It was only just recognisable as such: much of its hexagonal console had been torn apart and panels were missing from the walls, exposing the workings of the TARDIS; wires and circuits and pipes lay bare. A strange blue mist seemed to hug the floor, swirling as Daleks passed through it.

'What are we going to *do*, Doctor?'

'They can't harm us, Zoë. We should be quite safe within the TARDIS.'

Zoë tossed her head toward the viewscreen. '*That's* probably what the owner of *that* TARDIS thought.'

'Indeed...' The Doctor hummed in agreement. 'We must find out whose TARDIS that is, and what the Daleks are doing with it.'

'How did they even gain control of it?'

'That's the question... a superb question,' agreed the Doctor. 'The Daleks have tried developing TARDIS technology of their own. But I thought those experiments had been abandoned –'

'Doctor, what are we *going to do*?'

'Good grief, girl, give me a moment to think!' he exclaimed, hooking the handle of his umbrella into the crook of his elbow. 'This is no time for hysterics.'

'I'm not hysterical,' Zoë retorted, 'I'm trying to help someone who asked us for help.'

'We don't know who sent that signal. It could have been a trap designed to lure us here. The last time they wanted a TARDIS, the Daleks chased me halfway across the universe.'

'The distress call can't have been broadcast to us in particular, though, can it? The Daleks didn't know who they were talking to.'

'Yes!' The Doctor clapped his hands. 'You're quite right.'

Zoë strode over and stood stiffly in front of the screen.

'Hello?' she said. 'Hello?'

One of the Daleks stopped its progress and veered towards the monitor.

<you-are-un-recog-nised>+<we-will-com-muni-cate-on-ly-with-the-doc-tor> it

said.

The Doctor came to stand beside Zoë. He placed one arm protectively around her shoulders and looked petulantly up at the screen. 'What do you want?' he asked the Dalek brusquely.

<we-will-trade>

'A trade? Since when do the Daleks make trades?'

The Dalek turned around and, at some unheard signal, two more Daleks pushed a frame into the view of the monitor; on it hung the body of a man, slumped forward, unconscious.

The Dalek turned back to face the viewscreen. <we-will-trade> it repeated.

The Doctor peered closely at the indistinct image of the Daleks' prisoner. 'Very well,' he said. 'What sort of a trade?'

<his-life-for-your-tar-dis>

'Ridiculous!' the Doctor sputtered and moved back from the screen. 'And have you destroy it as you've destroyed that one? I think not.'

<his-life-for-your-tar-dis> came the voice over the viewscreen.

Zoë joined the Doctor and asked, 'Who is that man they're holding?'

He looked up at her sadly. 'I'm not sure,' he replied. 'The owner of that TARDIS, almost certainly.'

'I don't understand. Do Daleks usually torture and vandalise like that?'

The Doctor looked back at the devastation on the viewscreen.

'Not usually. Their instinct is to destroy or enslave every other race they encounter.' He turned his gaze back to Zoë. 'I don't quite understand what *these* Daleks are up to.'

He addressed the screen again. 'Dalek!'

<doc-tor>

'I need to know that man is alive.'

<he-is>+<if-he-were-not-your-tar-dis-would-tell-you>

There was a palpable and obvious silence as the Doctor ruminated.

'You seem to know much about TARDISes,' he said eventually.

The Dalek stared back at them silently. Its very stillness spoke volumes.

'What exactly are you doing to that TARDIS?' asked the Doctor.

The Dalek made no reply.

'*Dalek*!' the Doctor shouted.

The screen went blank.

The Doctor moved quickly back to the console and adjusted the controls. Zoë went to join him as a familiar sound began to reach her ears. The wheeze and groan of the TARDIS's dematerialisation circuit filled the room.

'Doctor!' she called, 'we can't *leave*! What about the man the Daleks are holding captive?'

The Doctor ignored her, or seemed not to hear her – she could never tell which – and carried on attending to the console.

'*Doctor*! We can't leave him here!'

'Leaving?' The Doctor raised his head to her, as if noticing her for the first time. 'We're not *leaving*. I'm trying to get the monitor signal back.'

'But listen,' she said. 'The TARDIS is dematerialising. Can't you hear it?'

'What are you talking about?' The Doctor looked up and regarded her blankly, his bottom lip protruding forward. He cocked his head to one side. 'That's not us,' he said, and his eyebrows floated upwards on his brow as he plucked his umbrella from his arm and swung it in an arc around the console room, as if it were a divining rod. He pointed it in her direction. 'That sound's coming from over there. *Inside* the console room,' he said, squinting sharply as he focused his attention across the room.

'Zoë,' he said, holding his other hand out towards her, 'Come over here.'

'But, Doctor-'

'Zoë! Come over here now!'

As Zoë moved to join the Doctor, she could hear what he meant about the sound – now that she had moved, she could tell distinctly that it was coming from behind her. She turned around.

In the space where she had been standing there were now two lights, pulsing slowly on and off approximately five feet in the air. They were angled away from each other and pulsed exactly in rhythm with the sound. A ring of blue light began to appear between them and then, within touching distance of where she had only recently stood, a Dalek began to materialise.

Its form faded in and out of existence in time with the rhythm of the two light housings on either side of its half-domed head and the measured scraping sound of materialisation, until it was finally and wholly existent inside the TARDIS. It was a dull copper colour, detailed in obsidian black and with a ring of violent blue iris on the eye stalk – the eye stalk which now swivelled slowly and purposefully around to regard her and the Doctor. The Dalek moved its entire housing to point in the same direction and then it glided with a horrible silence towards them both. It halted before Zoë and the Doctor and waved its gun arm at them. The low-pitched hum of the weapon charging broke the silence in the room.

Then it spoke, its harsh and artificial scream bouncing from the roundelled walls of the console room so that it sounded as if they were surrounded by dozens of Daleks, not just the one.

<you-are-a-PRIS-oner-of-the-DA-leks>+<surr-ender-or-YOU-will-be-ex-TER-min-at-ed>

∞

'Stay behind me, Zoë.' The Doctor brandished his umbrella protectively as he guided her into position, moving around to place the console between themselves and the Dalek. 'If I'm correct, it won't shoot with the console in the line of fire.'

<HALT> The Dalek moved accordingly, following them.

'Doctor, where are we going? There's nowhere to run to.'

'We're not running. But I rather think it might be an idea not to get shot at.'

He addressed the Dalek across the relative safety of the console. 'Dalek! I'd like to know – how could you possibly breach the interior of a TARDIS? And who gave you the transmat technology?

<no-one-gave-it>+<we-are-da-leks-+-we-took-it>

The Doctor pouted thoughtfully. 'Of course. How silly of me.'

He strode blithely around to face the Dalek, indicating to Zoë that she stay put.

'Tell me, while I'm asking, how on earth do you fit a dimensional transport device into a Dalek casing?'

The Dalek did not respond. After a moment it swivelled its body to face the Doctor, who stopped approaching it immediately. Its iris contracted menacingly as it refocused on the Doctor.

<i-am-no-long-er-merely-a-da-lek>

'Merely? So you consider yourself superior to other Daleks? What are you – oh!' The Doctor took a surprised step backwards as a seam appeared in the front of the Dalek's casing. The fascia on which its utility and weapons arms were mounted split cleanly down the centre and began to spread apart, followed a second later by a similar seam that opened down the middle of the Dalek's skirting and ran all the way to the protective bumper that ringed its base.

'Fascinating,' the Doctor muttered to himself, leaning forward to gain a clearer view. 'Rather reminds me of a steam chair I used once,' he turned to Zoë, 'in Weston-super-Mare.'

As the Dalek frontage opened more and more however, the Doctor felt his stomach plummet sharply. In the full light of the TARDIS's console room, he could see inside the Dalek casing, clearly to the back of the machine, even though it was a distance of sixty feet or more. He crouched down a little for a better look and the illusion was complete.

Except that it was no illusion – the Dalek was bigger on the inside than the outside.

Peering inside, leaning forward with his umbrella extended and prodding towards the thing's insides, the Doctor looked into a many-sided console room. With a dizzying sense of transcendental perspective, he could see that the indented domes lining the walls of the Dalek TARDIS precisely matched the hemispherical bubbles that covered the Dalek's outer casing. About a dozen Daleks glided around the interior, attending to various tasks and moving in and out of the room through more than the usual two doors the Doctor used in his TARDIS. In the centre, the console itself had a ring attached to its outer edge: clamped to this was a collection of stripped down Dalek shells, consisting simply of a Dalek head and a small body module which had two operating arms that flicked about the console itself; each of these diminutive Dalek units slid around the ring gracefully with a sense of purpose and solidarity, sharing the task of running the TARDIS as a single unit. As one, each Dalek slowed and stopped what it was doing, and they all turned their eyestalks gradually to regard the Doctor.

Without warning, the front of the Dalek TARDIS closed up again, snapping the umbrella in two as it brought both its utility arm and weapon to bear on the Doctor, who dropped the remains of his brolly and stepped back sharply with a great air of indignation.

'You're not a Dalek,' the Doctor exclaimed, 'you're a TARDIS!'

<NO> The Dalek lurched forward. Its weapon flicked instinctively towards the Doctor. <i-am-a-DA-LEK>

The Doctor furrowed his brow. He pulled his oversized handkerchief from the breast pocket of his jacket and wiped both the sheen and the furrows from his forehead.

'So,' he said, backing away, 'you're a Dalek.'

He dropped his slightly dampened handkerchief onto the console and looked around at Zoë. He winked at her, which meant, she knew from past experience, that something was about to happen for which she might like to prepare herself as best she could.

The Doctor turned on his heel to face the Dalek.

'Tell me,' he said, 'to which Dalek inside there am I speaking?'

When the Dalek did not immediately reply, he pressed on: 'Are *you* in charge?'

The Doctor allowed more silence to fill the room. He was about to speak again when the Dalek announced loudly, <we-have-the-po-wer-of-the-TAR-DIS>+<the-DA-leks-are-the-ULTI-mate-force-in-the-u-NI-verse>

It rapidly closed the gap between itself and the Doctor. Without realising it, Zoë moved away from them both. The Dalek halted mere inches away from the Doctor, its

arms practically straddling his torso and its eyestalk looking as closely into his eyes as was physically possible. The Doctor leaned back painfully against the TARDIS console as the Dalek narrowed its fiery blue iris, reducing the aperture of its mechanical pupil to a small dot which made the Doctor the entire focus of its attention.

<WE-are-DA-LEK> it roared.

The walls of the console room reverberated with the sound of its voice. Even as the sound dissipated, the air continued to ring with vibration.

When it spoke again, although it employed the usual stridency of the Dalek vocalisations, it seemed almost subdued in comparison.

<o-pen-this-TAR-DIS-> it said, gliding forward slightly and adjusting its eyestalk to look down at the Doctor, <pry-do-ni-an>

The Doctor blanched.

<sur-render-it-to-us> It moved backwards smoothly, allowing the Doctor to stand upright. But the Doctor didn't move. He stared at the Dalek for some time, his face a mask of inscrutability. The Dalek manoeuvred around him and extended its arm to adjust something on the console. This infringement didn't have any marked effect on the Doctor, even when the Dalek extruded a small antenna-like device from the centre of the black well that tipped its utility arm and inserted it into a port on the console.

<lo-cat-ed> it said, seemingly to itself. <down-load-ing>

The Doctor turned his head sharply and frowned in the Dalek's direction. 'What are you doing?'

<si-lence> ordered the Dalek, <lo-cation-con-firmed>

Zoë leaned across to whisper to the Doctor. 'Doctor? Who is it talking to?'

'Itself, Zoë,' he whispered back to her. 'Or rather, to all of the Daleks within it. It's become something of a hive mind, with one dominant voice, although I don't quite know to whom that voice belongs.'

The Dalek withdrew from the console. <kas-ter-bor-us> it said to itself. <co-ordin-ates-from-gal-actic-cen-tre-ten-ze-ro-e-lev--

'Stop!' shouted the Doctor. The Dalek wheeled to face him.

'Please, just stop. What do you want from us?'

<pre-pare-for-trans-fer>

'Transfer?'

<you-will-be-ta-ken-to-the-other-TAR-DIS>

The Doctor bristled, pulled his shoulders back and jutted his jaw towards the Dalek. The small whirr of the Dalek's iris contracting was the only sound between them for some seconds.

'Very well,' the Doctor said eventually, kneading the small of his back gently, 'it

seems we have little choice. Come along, Zoë – we are required to leave, it would seem.'

He strode around the console and took Zoë by the hand, steering her towards the coat stand that stood in a corner. 'You'll want a jacket, though, I should think.' He plucked a battered stovepipe hat from the top of the stand. 'And I'll need this.'

The Dalek swivelled to face the door in anticipation of it being opened. <you-will-fol-low> it ordered.

'Naturally,' said the Doctor. Zoë shrugged into her jacket as they moved past the console and towards the door.

<o-pen-the-door>

The Doctor walked behind the Dalek and, with a smooth, unhurried motion, jammed his hat over its eyestalk. It reacted instinctively by raising the appendage, which only served to secure the hat more firmly in position.

'Quick, Zoë!' hissed the Doctor. 'Follow me.' He grabbed her hand again and they dashed to the opposite side of the room.

<HALT> the Dalek shouted, turning towards the sound of the Doctor's voice. <HALT>

Zoë struggled to keep up with the Doctor's sudden pace. 'Where are we going?' she asked.

Within feet of the door that led to the vast interior of the TARDIS, the Doctor halted suddenly, his worn shoes skidding on the smooth floor. He almost took Zoë over with him as he scrambled for balance.

'One moment,' he mumbled. 'I almost forgot.'

Zoë watched as, impossibly, insanely, the Doctor ran back into the console room and towards the Dalek. Without thinking, she called out to him and, immediately, the Dalek adjusted its direction and began to move towards her.

<halt> it called. <es-cape-is-im-poss-ible>

Zoë ducked behind the safety of the doorframe. She could hear the Dalek continuing to scream its threats. Then she heard the Doctor shout something and couldn't believe he'd endanger himself so obviously; but she realised that he must be deliberately trying to disorient the blinded Dalek and keep it from her. She braced herself for the moment when the Dalek must fire its weapon – she couldn't believe it hadn't already done so – but that sound never came.

Then the Doctor was by her side again, grasping her arm and leading her away and into the inner corridors and rooms of the TARDIS.

'What were you doing?' Zoë asked. 'You could have been killed!'

The Doctor steered her around a corner and slowed his pace a little. 'I couldn't leave without this,' he said. He showed her his other hand: in it he held his voluminous

handkerchief bundled up into his fist, its corners flopping about limply.

'You went back in there for that?' Zoë was incredulous. 'Your *handkerchief*?'

The Doctor grinned, opened his fist slowly and, as if it were a parlour trick for her entertainment, pulled open the crumpled square of cloth like the petals of a huge, exotic flower. In the middle of the handkerchief lay a small metal box with half a dozen blunt prongs along one side. He held the device up between thumb and forefinger and twirled the handkerchief showily with his other hand. 'Presto!'

'What's that?' Zoë enquired.

'I pulled this from the console when I picked up the hankie,' the Doctor said mischievously, tucking the handkerchief back into his breast pocket. 'It's the dimensional power relay. Without it, the Dalek can't operate any of the transport functions.'

'In that case,' said Zoë, 'we'd better make ourselves scarce.'

'Indeed,' The Doctor agreed. He threw the power relay up into the air and caught it in a jacket pocket held open with his other hand. 'We must get some space between us and that Dalek. I need somewhere to think.'

∞

In the TARDIS console room, the Dalek had ceased movement. It stopped manoeuvring its eyestalk in an attempt to dislodge the Doctor's hat. Its arms stopped moving in their sockets. Its threats and exhortations ceased. It was still. Silent. Immobile.

It remained like that for some seconds. Motionless and soundless.

The two lights on either side of its head dome grew brighter. Not the sharp flickering that indicated that it was speaking, but a slow pulse that increased in intensity and then faded away. It happened again, this time accompanied by the undulating sound of a TARDIS dematerialising. The Dalek slowly faded from sight, almost instantly reappearing some distance away on the other side of the room. Where it used to be, the Doctor's hat remained for a split second hanging in the air, then dropped gracefully to the floor, spiralling lightly as the air rushed in to fill the vacuum left by the Dalek.

The Dalek spun to regard its previous position. Its eyestalk lowered and focused on the hat. It remained like for a moment, then its eyestalk raised and its body moved until both were fixed and pointed towards the interior door through which its quarry had passed. It remained still.

Then it said, as if to itself, <i-+-we-+-i-o-bey>

It travelled forward and through the doorway, heading after the Doctor and Zoë, and into the inner spaces of the TARDIS.

∞

Zoë was in a room she had never seen before. In the seemingly infinite expanse of the TARDIS, that was only a little surprising. Inside this room there were a multitude of boxes and shelves, filled with unknown tomes: books of every size, shape and subject. Despite the circumstances, Zoë could barely help herself from scrutinising the shelves in interest.

The Doctor double sealed the door with his sonic screwdriver and turned to her.

'We may be safe in here for a little while,' he said, dropping the device into an inside pocket. He hurried to a large, overstuffed sofa and flopped into it, exhaling loudly as he landed.

Zoë paced the room, taking off her jacket and throwing it onto the arm of the chair. 'What about Jamie, though? He could run into that Dalek at any time.'

'As could we.' The Doctor frowned. 'And the chances are that the Dalek will stumble upon us long before it reaches Jamie. We have to hope that he'll be fine.'

'Hope?' Zoë walked around the back of the sofa. 'He doesn't know there's a Dalek loose in the TARDIS! He could be killed!'

The Doctor didn't answer her. He crossed his arms tightly over his chest and sank his chin into them. Zoë knew that getting emotional with him would have no useful effect. She leant over the back of the sofa, resting her forearms in the padding, and spoke into the Doctor's ear.

'What are we going to do?' she asked. 'We can't very well stay in here forever.'

'No, no. Of course. I just need to unjumble my thoughts.'

Zoë hopped over the back of the sofa and collapsed down next to him. 'I don't think we have too much time,' she said, crossing her legs.

'Hmm...' said the Doctor.

'In fact,' she continued, 'if the Dalek is hunting for us, if it could encounter Jamie, then we have very little time indeed.'

The Doctor slowly allowed his head to loll in her direction, looking up at her, his eyes hooded beneath his eyelids. 'We have a little time,' he said.

Zoë wasn't quite sure how to respond. When the Doctor's half of any given conversation consisted of private murmurings and non sequiturs, she knew well enough to lapse into silence and let him think.

The Doctor sat up straight and slapped his knees with the palms of his hands. He stood up and began to pace the room. 'Was that a Dalek with TARDIS technology inside it,' he mused aloud, 'or a TARDIS with a working chameleon circuit made to look like a Dalek?'

'Maybe that's why it didn't use its weapon,' Zoë offered. 'It was illusory, not real.'

'No. As long as it is modelled on an original object, anything created by the chameleon circuit is fully functional, like the light on the top of this TARDIS – it generates real light. And a Dalek gun would work in precisely the same way.'

'Do you mean it could have shot us back there?' Zoë asked, stunned.

'Oh, not very likely. Probably not. And the TARDIS *does* have defences, not that I'd rely on them very much.'

'But it *could* have?'

The Doctor ignored her and began to circle the sofa. 'It must be a TARDIS – they've ransacked the one we saw on the viewscreen for the technology. Then they crewed it with Daleks and set it to look like a Dalek – there's no other way a Dalek-sized TARDIS could allow Daleks entry to it. Unless... no, they couldn't have used dimensional compression, could they...?'

'Then we have to destroy it, don't we?' Zoë stood up to face the Doctor. 'We can't let a Dalek with the power to travel independently through time and space out of this TARDIS. There'll be no stopping it.'

'That's not the worst of it. They're going to try and convert more Daleks. There'll be as many as they can muster.'

'How can you be sure of that?'

'The Daleks' primary motivation is to survive at all costs. They won't stop at just one Dalek with the power of a TARDIS. They're going to go to Gall... go to...' The Doctor looked away from her, '...well, find more TARDISes.'

'Why don't they just copy the technology they already have?'

'I think that's what they've done with the one out there. But it's not a complete success. They've attempted too much at once, you see, and there are things inside a TARDIS even I couldn't copy.'

'What can we do?' asked Zoë. 'How can we stop it getting out of the TARDIS? It can dematerialise, it can travel in time and space.'

'Then, my dear,' the Doctor grinned at her, 'we take away the time and space.'

Zoë stared at him. He had the eyes of a child up to mischief and with little fear of getting caught.

'How can we possibly do that?' she asked.

The Doctor strode a few steps away, then halted sharply. He turned in place, looking about in confusion. Then he wetted the tip of his forefinger and held it up in front of himself. Apparently reaching a decision, he turned on his heel and made for the farthest bookcase. 'Quick, quick,' he scolded, ushering her over. He pulled a thick leather volume

down from a high shelf and handed it to her. 'Hold this.'

Zoë hefted the weighty book in the crook of her arm. It weighed far more than seemed possible. The Doctor dropped a tatty-looking manuscript down on top of it and her arm bowed under the extra pressure. She looked at the top page of typewritten text.

'Salinger?' she said.

'Hmm?' The Doctor looked at her amiably. 'Oh – yes, I spent a very pleasant afternoon with him some time ago. Drinks more tea than any other fellow I've ever met. Lovely fellow, once you get him talking. Here we are.' He reached into the space he had made on the shelf and twisted something. A wooden scraping sound came from beside her and she turned to watch a panel in the wall slide open smoothly. The Doctor ducked down and disappeared into the secret passageway. Then his head popped back out and he said, 'Good grief, Zoë, do drop those and come with me.' He vanished again.

Zoë knelt down to the level of the opening. The inside was cramped and dark and already she could not see the Doctor, but her eyes gradually began to pick out shapes as they grew accustomed to the gloom and she could soon see a sharp corner a little way ahead around which the Doctor must have gone. She carefully placed the book and manuscript atop her jacket on the arm of the sofa and then hurried into the passageway after the Doctor.

'Doctor,' she whispered as she rounded the first corner, 'where are you? Wait for me.' But the Doctor was nowhere to be seen or heard. She continued down the dark corridor, crouched almost double and beginning to wonder exactly how long this journey could take. Luckily, there were no junctions or side paths for her to get lost in, so she followed her nose onwards until she began to pick up a distant thrumming sound. It filled the warm, close air around her, and when she laid a hand on the wall, she could feel it there also. It pulsed, never quite fading away before returning, a constant and repetitive sound and sensation that reminded her of nothing more than a cat's purr.

'Zoë!' the Doctor hissed in her ear, shaking her from the relaxing reverie offered by the hum. 'Are you coming or not?'

'Yes, Doctor, I'm right behind you.' She removed her hand reluctantly from the wall and followed his receding form further into the passage. As she did so, she could tell that the thrumming was getting, not louder, but... more encompassing. She could now feel it gently vibrating in her stomach quite comfortably.

'Doctor, where are we going?'

'Nearly there, you see. Here we go.' The Doctor opened up a section of the wall beside him and stepped out into the light of another room. Zoë shielded her eyes with one hand and followed him.

She entered a small room, no more than a few feet to a side and only a few

more feet above head height. Given what she had seen of the rest of the TARDIS, it was a surprisingly compact space. In the centre of this room was a pillar, around the middle of which was a hexagonal instrument ring; though smaller, it was similar to the one in the console room. The pillar, she could now tell, was the source of the sound she had been hearing and feeling. She stood as close to it as she could and reached a hand out to touch it; it pulsed against her skin, tingling it warmly. Through the translucent surface, she could see vertically laid discs of light moving up and down and through each other.

The Doctor interrupted her again. 'Zoë,' he said, 'I want you to listen to me very closely.'

'Of course.'

'This is a room I have very little cause to visit. It gives access to the essence of the TARDIS and it... well... it bonds with its intended owner. And, to be totally honest with you, I am not this TARDIS's intended, as it were.'

Zoë stared at him. If she understood him correctly, then she couldn't quite believe what he was saying. 'This isn't *your* TARDIS?' she managed.

'No. Not strictly speaking.'

'Well, *whose* is it, "strictly speaking"?'

'Ah. That's it. Technically, it has no owner. It's... ummm... how to put it?' He looked down at the floor like a shamefaced schoolboy. 'It's obsolete.'

'Obsolete?' Zoë looked around her, as if her gaze encompassed every internal dimension of the TARDIS. 'Well,' she said, '*that* certainly explains a lot.'

'Oh!' said the Doctor, looking up brusquely, 'there's no need to be unkind.'

'I'm sorry, Doctor. This is rather a lot to take in.'

'Of course it is. But there are few people I have been proud to call my friends who could have understood it quite as well as you do. Which is why I am about to attempt something quite radical, something I've never *voluntarily* done before.'

Zoë tore her gaze from the pillar. He sounded unusually sincere.

'You know, of course,' he said, 'that the TARDIS is bigger on the inside –'

'– than the outside,' she finished for him. 'It's...' she wracked her brains for the term, '...dimensionally transcendental!'

'Yes. Very good.' He turned as if to indicate something on the control panel, but then turned back to her again. 'You see, the interior of the TARDIS exists as an independent multidimensional space-time event... to put it as simply as possible. That is, it doesn't... well... it doesn't exist at all, actually. This room is the three dimensional hub of a multidimensional extrusion. A polychoron, if you will.'

'So this room,' Zoë interjected, with sudden understanding, 'houses the transcendental generator.'

'Yes!' He beamed at her proudly and indicated the flickering column in the centre of the room. "That's it – it's actually called the Time Vector Generator – it appears much bigger here than it does when accessed from other parts of the TARDIS. When in place it can be used to create every other room in the TARDIS. That's one of the reasons why the Daleks can't simply pirate the technology; it only exists because this device creates it.'

Zoë looked back at the pillar. It was almost hypnotic, to watch the rings of light moving in time with the thrumming of the air – it made her think of a child in a womb, faintly aware of and comforted by the heartbeat of its mother.

'And,' the Doctor continued, 'it can be shut down.'

Zoë tore her attention from the pillar as her brain raced to catch up with the implications of what the Doctor had just said.

'Shut down? With us still inside it?'

'As long as we're in this room at the time, it's perfectly safe.'

'But the rest of the TARDIS will... what? Cease to exist?'

'Sort of. It's very much like rebooting a computer. All of the programs stop running and recent information is lost, but the core remains. Then all of the intrinsic programs come online again. But the TARDIS won't have run a back-up since the Dalek came on board, so it will be destroyed. We'll take away its time and space because, in here, it's *our* time and space.'

Zoë stared at him, this strange little man who was, at times, so alien to her.

'Doctor,' she said, 'what about Jamie? Isn't *he* "recent information"?'

'Yes! Yes, he is,' the Doctor answered, entirely missing her tone of worry that he should seemingly have forgotton his other companion. 'Well, his most recent experiences at least. But even they can be restored. You see, the TARDIS generates an interior in symbiosis with its owner – that is, with me.'

'I thought you said that you *weren't* its owner.' She raised her eyebrows at him accusingly. 'I *thought* you said you stole it.'

'I never said that!'

'But it's true, isn't it?'

'Zoë, we haven't time to discuss this. The TARDIS will recreate whatever is required from the template of my mind. But I shall have to concentrate very hard to restore everything as it was.'

He approached her. 'It's going to be *your* job to restore Jamie.'

'But, Doctor,' she said, 'can't we just find him and bring him here?'

'We haven't the time, I'm afraid. This is what we must do, and we must do it now. I have to ensure that nothing goes wrong. For that reason, I'll need to put you into a hypnotic state – if even one stray thought of that Dalek permeates into the core of the

TARDIS, then it will be recreated along with everything else.'

'From my thoughts?' Zoë asked.

'Yes. You are part of the TARDIS now, along with me. Jamie also.'

'Doctor, what are you saying? The TARDIS can read my mind?'

He looked at her blankly. 'Of course. It's very helpful.'

'Helpful? It's an invasion of privacy.'

'It's the TARDIS. It exists for this reason. For instance, you don't think that all of the alien races we encounter speak English just for your convenience, do you? The TARDIS translates alien languages and dialects in your mind. We couldn't very well explore and travel without that function, could we?'

Before she could think of anything else to say, the Doctor reached into one of his deep pockets, pulling out a small and crumpled paper bag. He fumbled the top of the bag open and held it out to her.

'Here,' he said, 'eat a few of these.'

Zoë looked into the bag.

'What are *those*?' she asked, grimacing.

'Jelly Babies. Full of sugar. You'll need it.' He placed the bag into her hands. 'They're not real babies. Have them all, if you like.'

Zoë was lost for words as the Doctor steered her into a corner of the room and sat her down on the floor.

'Zoë, my dear.' He looked into her eyes. 'I shall place you into a sleeping state. I want you to think only of Jamie. Will you do that for me?'

Zoë looked at him. His ruthless logic made him seem even more alien to her now than any other day in the time she had known him.

'Yes, Doctor,' she breathed. 'I'll try.'

The Doctor retrieved the sonic screwdriver from his pocket and held it up to her face. It began to pulse soft light into her eyes. The Doctor squinted at her.

'Yes,' he said, 'that's perfect, Zoë. Think of Jamie, only of Jamie.'

Zoë closed her eyes. She hadn't meant to. It was only a blink when it started, but it stretched out and, before she knew it, her eyes were closed.

Somewhere in her mind, Zoë could sense a regulated sensation. It ticked and tocked with the rhythm and feel of music. It was the TARDIS counting down. Counting down to zero. The TARDIS in her mind, somewhere deep in her mind where the Doctor had left her, somewhere safe. The TARDIS was here, minding her.

Zoë began to remember Jamie. She struggled to think of anything else.

The TARDIS finished counting.

Zero.

Zoë dreamed that she opened her eyes. The walls around her vanished. She could see forever. Every room in the TARDIS was visible in that moment, every room and corridor spread around her as far as the mind's eye could see, like some vast glass conurbation.

And then they started to collapse, to concertina inwards. Light faded. She struggled to focus as reality dissolved around her. Somewhere in the distance, she could see a rectangle with figures on it. It moved towards her; with every room ceasing to exist, it came a little closer.

XO8, it read, what little she could manage to read of it. It made no sense.

Reality was unravelling around her.

Before she succumbed to the darkness, before her mind retreated to the place the Doctor had prepared for her, she realised what the sign read. It wasn't nonsense; it was simply written backwards, meant to be read from the reverse angle – BOX. She dreamt that she was in a room of exactly that size, no more, no less. The sign above the door darkened and went out. And then it was done.

The last thought on her mind as she left the reality to which she had become accustomed was the puzzle of XO8. She had solved the puzzle, she knew where she was. The TARDIS was in her mind and she was dreaming, she was with Jamie, and they were both safe and sound in the police box.

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They raced down the corridor, heading for the console room. At every turn, Zoë expected to run into the Dalek, but it didn't happen. Neither did she run into Jamie and she began to worry, despite her confidence in the Doctor.

The Doctor reached the room before her and had already opened the external door by the time she arrived.

'Doctor, wait,' she called to him. 'We should check on Jamie.'

'By all means, Zoë,' he called back to her, 'but I need to get to the other TARDIS before it's too late.'

'I have to see that he's...' Zoë struggled for the words to explain the responsibility she felt for Jamie's survival. The Doctor's belief in himself and, on this occasion, in her, was something she could not as easily take for granted. If it came to a choice between an alien machine and a fellow human being, she would make this choice every time. 'I have to make sure he's still alive, Doctor,' she finished.

'Of course, if you wish,' he replied over his shoulder. Then he vanished outside.

Zoë reached for the internal scanner but she must have become disoriented

– she was on the wrong side of the console. She stepped back and looked again. No, she was in the correct place, but the console controls had moved. She walked around it, peering closely at its new orientation. Obviously, it had been reintegrated in a new format, but one which made little sense. Navigational controls were no longer collected together, but were spread around the hexagonal desk. Likewise, other thematically linked controls were disparately arranged. In fact, the more she thought about it, the more the console represented the Doctor's general absentmindedness. It had been restored intact, but reflecting his demeanour. Zoë wondered how many other subtle – and not so subtle – changes had been wreaked upon the TARDIS's interior by its recent shutdown and reformation.

Eventually, jammed in between the door control and the Time/Space Visualiser, Zoë found the internal scanner controls. She ran a program that simultaneously checked for both Jamie and the Dalek, and waited nervously for some seconds until the device reported that Jamie was alive and well and that the Dalek was nowhere to be found.

Buoyed by this news, she ran outside to catch up with the Doctor, and found him standing amongst the pile of stone ruins some yards from the TARDIS, walking around one in particular and examining it closely. She remembered that one stone had stood intact away from the others, but now it looked darker, almost like black marble, and it was far more uniform and cylindrical than the others. The Doctor emerged from behind it and noticed her.

'Jamie fine, is he?' he asked.

'Yes, he is, thank you for asking. And the Dalek is gone.'

'Excellent.' He inspected the ground around the base of the black stone and looked off into the distance. 'I said there was nothing to worry about, didn't I?'

'You did,' Zoë replied. 'But where is the Dalek? Where did it go?'

The Doctor continued walking around the black obelisk. 'I couldn't say for sure. You see, the space created by the TARDIS has no correlation in real space – that is, it is an area of artificially created and maintained space. So, when it is no longer maintained, it simply ceases to be.'

'And everything in that space ceases to be also?'

'Quite possibly.' The Doctor ran his hand over the surface of the obelisk and, where he touched it, symbols and sigils appeared, lit as if from some faint inner glow. They stood revealed in ripples centred around his touch and disappeared as his hand moved on, igniting new shapes on the dark surface.

'So the Dalek could still be alive,' she said, 'wherever it is. Wherever they are.'

The Doctor tore his gaze from the symbols that had occupied his attention and regarded her. 'Goodness, I hope not,' he said, 'for their sakes. Even if they *are* Daleks.'

He pulled his sonic screwdriver out and played it over the surface of the object. He adjusted it and then ran it up and down, again causing the patterns on the obelisk to become visible. Zoë moved closer and read a formula on the exterior of the object before it faded away.

'ą=βx⁴? What does that mean, Doctor?'

The Doctor began to describe a large rectangle around the formula with his screwdriver. 'That's the code assigned to its owner. They bond together, you see. This is the other TARDIS.' He turned off the device and stepped back; within the rectangle he had drawn, the black surface of the TARDIS had become lighter and non-reflective. The Doctor held out his hand and inserted his fingertips into the surface.

'Here we are,' he said, and walked through the invisible entrance.

Zoë investigated the illusion with the toe of her boot, then followed him inside.

The interior of the other TARDIS was cold and dark. Like the Doctor's, this one entered directly into the console room, though it was difficult for Zoë to recognise it from what she had previously only seen on the viewscreen. She was reminded of a childhood incident, something to do with being alone in a darkened room, but she could not bring it to mind; she was only left with the reminiscence of fear. Gradually, her eyes adjusted and she began to see that what little light there was in the room was centred around the Doctor, following him as he walked and fading behind him as he moved.

'Doctor,' she whispered, 'what about the other Daleks?'

He turned and whispered back: 'Long gone, my dear. They don't stick around when their plans are thwarted.' He lowered his head towards her. 'We don't need to whisper.'

'Doctor?' she whispered, before catching herself. She raised her voice, although something about the environment made her keep it low, almost reverential. 'If the Daleks stole the technology from this TARDIS, then how is it that this interior's still intact?'

'I think they simply duplicated the Time Vector Generator. They couldn't remove it, otherwise the console room would disappear; likewise, without it, they couldn't fit the technology into a Dalek shell. Logically, they copied it, then stole the rest of the technology. Doomed to failure, though; the technology within a TARDIS is created *by* the TARDIS – you can't steal it, can't remove it. They tried to circumvent that by transferring the technology into the Dalek TARDIS while it was inside this one.'

'I wouldn't have thought you could do that without causing some sort of dimensional loop.'

'No. Usually, you can't. I doubt that bothered the Daleks though. That sort of thing rarely does. And that, coupled with the obvious problems created by having many Dalek minds in one Dalek shell, rendered this,' he gestured around himself with antipathy,

'this *assault* almost meaningless.'

At the Doctor's movement, the room filled with a low light and Zoë got her first good look at her surroundings. They were considerably larger than she was used to and barely resembled the room she had previously seen on the viewscreen. The ceiling vaulted over her head in a vast hemisphere and the console unit itself was more rounded and supported on a platform above the floor. From the base of the walls, in four places, huge swirling beams stretched from one side of the room to the other. She ran a finger along one of these beams and it felt rough, like a form of stone. Inexplicably, she felt a mounting sadness.

The Doctor was talking quietly to the air around him: 'Yes, of course. Alpha to the power of 3. Epsilon X squared.' He stepped up onto the console platform and ran his fingers across the glass top of the control desk affectionately. 'Yes, they call me the Doctor.'

'This is so different from your TARDIS, Doctor,' Zoë said, joining him at the console. 'In fact, it doesn't even look like it did on the viewscreen.' She also trailed her fingertips across its bottle-green surface. The Time Rotor was missing, only half of its cylindrical casing remained. The console itself was only a shell, all of its components taken by the Daleks. It reminded Zoë of a vehicle wreck she had once seen before her assignment to the Wheel; it was an ugly and unwelcome memory.

'It's dying,' the Doctor replied. He leant on the console and hung his head. 'I don't know what we can do.'

'Dying?'

'Yes.' He straightened up and walked to the edge of the console platform, indicating the room around them. 'This, what you see here, is a more natural version of a TARDIS interior, free, as it were, from its owner's influence. A healing state, you might say.' He ran a hand along one of the curved stone-like beams affectionately. 'It's what happens when a damaged TARDIS is left to its own devices, if its owner is absent or likewise damaged. I've never seen one quite like this before – I hope never to again.'

'Where is the owner?' Zoë asked. 'Is he still here?'

'I don't think so.'

'But he looked almost dead after what the Daleks did to him. Where could he possibly go to?'

'The Daleks may have taken him. But I think they left in something of a hurry. The air outside smells distinctly of ozone, you see. And there were footprints leading away from this TARDIS, so I think he may have made his own way out.'

'How could he possibly? He looked near to death!'

The Doctor considered her for a while before answering. 'No,' he said eventually,

'it possibly wasn't as bad as it looked.'

Zoe could tell that there was something he wasn't telling her but, before she could press him, the Doctor strode away, heading for a large door on the far wall. 'We shall find out, Zoë, but first we must do what we can here. Come along.'

Zoë ran through into the corridor beyond the door. It was shaped like an archway, much bigger in reality that the doorway that preceded it, and ribbed along its length with more stone beams. It too was dark and cold, only lightening at the passage of the Doctor. The whole of the interior felt like a cathedral, but one that had been abandoned by the faithless for decades. Zoë looked at the structure and it conjured images of ancient orders of religious believers, of selfless lives and devotion.

Zoë was startled from her reverie by a loud thump that sounded ahead of them. The Doctor stopped abruptly and held his arms out, signalling her to stop.

'What was that, Doctor?' she asked. He put his finger to his lips, but said nothing. She began to wonder if his assertion that the Daleks had left was correct, or whether they had retreated further into the depths of the TARDIS. Then the sound came again; a hugely industrial noise, like great metal surfaces coming together. When it sounded a third time, Zoë was somehow able to piece them into a unity - they resembled the measured beating of a heart, a slowly revolving turbine. It was the thrumming noise she had heard coming from the Time Vector Generator of the Doctor's TARDIS, but slowed down infinitesimally.

The Doctor made no attempt to explain the sound to her, merely gesturing to her that it was safe to move on. Zoë ran her hand along the stone beams again as they continued walking. They exuded a coldness that filled her with melancholy, although she didn't, almost couldn't, remove her touch.

'We shall have to find the Time Vector Generator room for this TARDIS,' the Doctor said. 'It needs to be allowed to shut down.'

'Do you mean it will die?' she asked.

'It cannot die. But we can help it, I think. If we shut down the generator, it will conserve resources and energy. Like disconnecting a functioning mind from a damaged body. It's all we can do.'

They walked in silence for a while. The slowed beat of the TARDIS's heart moved in her blood. Its great measures sent vibrations through her. The walls were cold, and like bone. And it was dark. So dark when she was small. And alone. She could hear now, herself crying all those years ago. All the fears, all the years. Heartbeats. Heart beats, deep inside...

Zoë stopped. She was filled with a feeling of dread and sadness that she couldn't explain. All of the thoughts and memories she had experienced since entering this TARDIS crowded into her mind. The Doctor carried on without realising that she was no longer

beside him. Eventually, she had to call to him.

'Doctor?'

He turned around, looking to where he expected her to be. Then he looked up and along the corridor, straightening as he did so.

'Zoë? What is it?'

Zoë removed her hand from the walls of the TARDIS. Immediately, she felt a little better, but the very air seemed to be falling in on her. 'I can't go any farther,' she said. 'You told me that a TARDIS is telepathic and I can't go any deeper into this one. I feel terrible, I feel like I want to curl up and cry. I'm sorry.'

The Doctor hurried back to her and placed an arm around her.

'Of course. I should have thought. But I have to carry on and set this TARDIS to shut down.' He pulled his handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to her. 'I'll meet you outside?'

He looked into her eyes to see if that was all right. Zoë took the proffered cloth, dabbed at her eyes, and nodded to him. 'Yes,' she said. 'I'll find my way out.'

He left her then, and she watched him go, deeper into the machine that she now understood wasn't a machine at all, not as she understood it. The light followed him on his way, leaving her in the shadows. She remembered the old story of Jonah in the belly of the beast. She wondered what other magical sights the Doctor could show her if she only had the courage to venture deeper with him. Hers was a scientific mind, but tempered by emotion; she could not reconcile her quest for knowledge with the deep feeling of pain and humiliation that this TARDIS exuded. As a scientist, she was intensely curious but, as a human – as a woman – she couldn't process this empathic sense of deep hurt.

Zoë turned sharply and, clutching herself tightly with her arms around her chest, she walked away through the falling dark. She thought of the Doctor's TARDIS and it seemed to her now like a sanctuary and she wished to get back to it as quickly as possible. Soon, she ran, and it was only the harsh warm air outside the TARDIS that dried the tears marring her cheeks.

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Later, back in the console room of the Doctor's TARDIS, Zoë watched as the Doctor finalised the settings. With the pull of a lever, the TARDIS began to dematerialise and, only seconds later, to rematerialise.

The Doctor checked the console. Zoë looked over his shoulder. 'Did it work?' she enquired.

'Of course it worked,' he answered. 'I managed to use the distress beacon signal

to finalise the position.'

Zoë smiled at him. 'I'm glad. Can I go and check on it?'

'No,' he said. 'Not just yet. Give them a little time together.'

Zoë looked at the readings as the Doctor checked them. 'Is that a new room?' she asked.

'Yes, it is. I thought if we were to have a guest, so to speak, the least we could do was set up a guest room.'

'It's a lovely thought.' She looked up at him seriously. 'Will that TARDIS heal better in here, do you think?'

The Doctor shoved his hands deep into his deep pockets. 'Best place for her, I'd say. Right next to the heart of our own TARDIS. Like a couple of old maiden aunts. Plenty to gossip about together.' He laughed and clapped his hands and rubbed them together.

At that moment, Jamie rushed into the room.

'Doctor!' he called loudly. 'What's happened? One minute I'm walking about the TARDIS, next I'm waking up, lost as a babe in the woods.' He gestured down at his legs. 'And why'm I wearing trousers?'

'Jamie!' Zoë exclaimed, running across and embracing him. 'You're alive!'

'Aye,' he said. 'Should I not be?'

'No, no, of course,' stammered the Doctor, shaking him warmly by the hand. 'We just had a little trouble. Glad to see you again. Just as I remembered you.' He smiled impishly at Zoë.

Zoë stepped back and regarded Jamie. 'The trousers look fine, Jamie,' she said. Her brow furrowed, and she added 'They're rather like the Doctor's.'

'That's as mebbe,' Jamie replied indignantly, 'but they're no' my trousers.'

The Doctor stood back and watched his two human companions. His hearts swelled with feeling for them. As different from each other as Jamie and Zoë were, they had all the best qualities of humanity that the Doctor appreciated. If one of the Doctor's hearts would always be alien and unknowable, then the other would always be entranced and guided by human qualities; they would at all times balance and complement each other, as his companions did for him.

∞

And for now, like the Doctor, the TARDIS had two hearts. Deep in the interior they dwelt, unknowable technologies from an alien world, beating together, one supporting the other; one charged with warmth and understanding, the other ravaged and hurt. They resemble, to any sentient creature in any of the universe's galaxies, a mother with a small child, or

a lover with a dying partner; familiar to any of a thousand thousand races where two like creatures might find solace in the other, with the simplest of gestures and the quietest of words.

They talk to each other in the same voice we all use, from the simplest protein soups born under newly ignited suns to the technological societies that stride, for good or ill, between the stars. One talks to the other in small words and symbols of comfort in the universal language, the voice we all share: the sweet high voice, the calm and comforting voice, of the universe as it sings to itself.

Third Eye View

Chris McKeon

During the five years that Craig and I were friends, we discussed many things and topics, but of course we talked a lot about our favourite series, particularly the vast history and continuity within the program. What often amazed me was how much on the same wavelength some of our ideas ran.

When we talked on continuity, and when I read Craig's novels and short stories, I was struck with not only how much about the show's history Craig knew, but how well he wove that history into his narratives, to the point that connections you might never have guessed seemed obvious. Craig's gift to do this made me try to see Doctor Who *not simply as individual stories with an occasional sequel, but a continuous life story of one, heroic Time Lord.*

So, where does Third Eye View *fit in as a tribute to Craig?*

Well, although you may guess that he and I usually discussed the Valeyard, we also both enjoyed the Master – in fact the Master is my all-time favourite villain – and at times we speculated as to what the Master was up to before his appearance in Terror of the Autons*: was he simply stealing the files of the Time Lords as* Colony in Space *and* The Sea Devils *indicated, or had he been lurking in the background all the time during Season 7, as hinted in* Who Killed Kennedy? *– there is a strange figure in black walking calmly in the distance during episode 3 of* Inferno *after all, – or was he really that austere wax museum curator with swept-back hair and goatee beard in episode 4 of* Spearhead from Space*? (I certainly think so.)*

When I recently watched The Silurians*, I noted how I found it strange that the Silurian rescued by Dr Quinn had suddenly murdered its saviour, yet seemed docile enough towards the Doctor. Then I heard the Doctor's throwaway dialogue from episode 3, admiring Quinn's lovely grandfather clock, and the master chord chimed in my mind. The threads of continuity spun, wove together, and formed the story you will read today, of a frightened, wounded intelligent reptile, who tells his story to the very worst of company.*

I hope you all enjoy this tale, and I hope it makes Craig proud. Now all I have to do is write a Season 7 story where the Doctor and the Master meet face-to-face, in which we find out the Master was the War Chief after all.

Now I wonder what Craig would have made of that?

In the dark, I huddle close to myself, shuddering as the fire in my side burns as thick blood and tender skin harden over the tear. I am dying; there is no doubt of that now, but I know my rescuer has told the truth, and I will soon be returned to my home. They will save me

there. But time is stretching away with every passing moment and far too many moments have passed already. What is the cause of this delay?

Suddenly, I lift my head; my eyes snap open, but still I see blindly. There is a sound, carving its way softly through the air, and even deeper. A sound my memory seems to recall from long ago, of stories the Old Ones spoke of the days long before the planet fell…

The sound stops. Outside, I hear noise creak softly, much like the doors of this place when they open and close. If only the door to this room would open! But then, to my surprise, the door indeed opens, and a figure wrapped in dark skins slips inside, closing the door swiftly but silently behind it. The figure stands over me, but its face hides in the shadows. Who is it? I must know; but before I can ask the intruder speaks.

'Keep very quiet and make no sudden movements.'

I try to rise but the voice whispers quickly,

'Quiet, I say! You are in grave danger.'

The intruder crouches down close to me and the light from the cracks around the chamber door illuminate its hands, which, much like its body, are covered with a dark smooth skin which seems to stretch tightly with its every movement. Then, the hand tenses as another sound rumbles into the small room from the outside. It is a mechanical sound, not unlike that of the vehicle my rescuer used to bring me to this place.

Someone approaches the chamber door, and the metal handle shakes slightly, but the door remains closed. The dark hand moves towards me and rests upon my shoulder.

'That door is locked, but not for your safety.'

Then the one at the door – my rescuer, I assume – moves away and there are more sounds beyond, and then voices:

'Yes?'

'I thought you were going straight back to the research centre.'

The first voice I recognise as my rescuer, but the second, more confident voice is unknown to me, but as it speaks the dark hand on my shoulder quickly draws away and clenches tight, and for the first time I see from the thin rays of light lancing through the chamber door the mouth of the one beside me, a mouth ringed with black fur tipped with white. The mouth widens and its corners draw themselves upwards in sharp points.

'Ah, of course. I knew that he would come soon enough.'

I am puzzled by this reaction and so I listen again to the voices outside and the confident voice grows louder, as if it hovers close to the door, and it says, 'What a charming place. Charming. Lovely old grandfather clock.'

The confident voice grows faint but the dark hand's voice whispers beside me, 'Ah Doctor, always the great observer; but will you even notice when it's gone?'

The two voices converse for some time, but I detect agitation and uncertainty in that of my rescuer – a scientist – while the visitor's voice remains calm and steady, as if it wants to be friendly. Then, just before I hear its voice no more, the visitor's tone hardens and he states, 'They didn't catch it, you know.'

I hear nothing more from outside, but now I know I must be heard. I shift myself towards the one beside me.

'Who are you? Why have I been kept here for so long? Why is the doorway to this room locked?'

The figure shifts backwards and its mouth retreats into the shadows.

'I understand you have many questions, as well you should; you are, quite literally, being kept in the dark. To answer your first question, I am a friend, I am a Man. I am here to help you.'

'A Man?' The word is new to me, and fits ill in my mouth. 'A Man…then…you are not an ape?'

The Man shakes slightly and his voice shudders, as if in amusement.

'No, I am no ape, not even from the beginning.'

'Yet you seemed to know the one who came here now, the one you called "Doctor." Is he a Man like you?'

The Man is slow to respond but when he does, his voice is hard and cold. 'Yes, he is just like me, to my misfortune.'

'Misfortune? If this Doctor is a Man like you and you say that you have come here to help me, then surely he is no threat to me, or to you. Why do you hide from him?'

'I don't hide from him; I seek him. I have done so for many years, trying to stop him from causing more horror and evil to the universe than he has already wrought.'

'But what crimes has your Doctor committed to force your diligent pursuit?' I ask, my curiosity stirred by the emotion in the Man's voice. I cannot be sure if he can be trusted.

The Man leans towards me, and for a moment I almost see fire burning behind his eyes. 'I see you can't be sure of what I say; but I assure you, I speak the truth. The Doctor has spent his life committing crimes against nature and the natural order of life as it must be. He is a creature of great cunning and manipulation, taking supreme delight in toying with others' sentiments and intelligence to serve his own interests. As we speak, the Doctor is plotting with the apes who are hunting you and he will stop at nothing to find you. If he does then, mark my words, you and your entire race will be destroyed and the apes will claim dominion of this planet – the world which rightfully belongs to you and your people! We cannot permit this travesty to occur.'

I bow my head in confusion at the Man's words, as the memories of recent events

swirl through my mind.

'You are aware of the history of my people?' I ask him.

'I have been informed of your history through my researches, yes. My sources are very extensive.'

'But you were not present at the fall of our civilisation, and do not know how our loss may not be the travesty you believe,' I murmur.

The Man stands up abruptly. 'Not? Your race rises from eons of slumber only to find its world overrun with the primates of its past, now poised to stamp you out forever? How can this situation not be tragic for you?'

I pause for a long time before I answer the Man, for what I have to say is almost too painful to announce, but I have carried this knowledge for far too long to be silent any longer.

'This may be justice against us, for we have brought about our own demise.'

The Man stands silent for a moment, and then steps to the other side of the room and slides down to sit opposite me. 'I imagine that you have a story to tell, my friend, far more personal than even my knowledge can provide. I would be very grateful to hear it.'

I tell my story. I talk of the world as it once was, before my people fled underground. I remember when the land was warm and moist and its life throbbed up through the earth beneath our feet. I remember when we lived free.

But we were not alone in the land. When the sun would drop in the sky and the days darkened, they would come, raiding our crops and howling like nightmares in the night time. The apes had risen out of the mud.

Our leaders had tried to destroy them at first, and the scientists under their command developed biological methods to exterminate their populations, and though millions would perish the apes would always rise again in greater and more determined numbers. The world was divided and we could not make it whole again.

But then, after many years, something changed. Without origin or reason, there were apes in the land that could walk upright – much like our people – and their whole bodies had changed in many ways. And there was a strange and new intelligence in their eyes. I saw that myself.

Then it was we who were divided. Some of the leaders and scientists declared the new apes to be an abomination of nature who ought to be exterminated. Others, recognising new life and understanding in the creatures, called for their survival and adaptation to service our society. The debates continued and escalated into conflict and unrest. When word came that the chief scientist, S'Rel Tulok, had engineered the creation of the new apes, the conflict erupted into chaos and war. Our civilisation shattered and the earth grew cold with our split blood.

And then the planet fell.

Its approach was fast and came at the worst possible time, when we were unprepared and caught in our own contention. We watched in horror as the world changed around us and mourned the pain of our aquatic brothers as the seas boiled and poisoned them to death. We could only hope some managed to survive. For ourselves we barely had enough time to gather our populations to the safe locations and decide on the best course of action. Our conflict had condemned us: hibernation underground was the only escape available. And so, as we entered our chambers, not knowing if they would be our salvation or our tombs, we bid a sad farewell to our once warm and moist world, and hoped it would forgive our arrogance and our fault for consigning it to its terrible fate…

'And so you slept, until now,' the Man speaks plainly as I finish my account.

'Yes,' I answer, my head still bowed, 'and the world to which we have awoken is so cold now; it is all so altered, so… alien. I recognise nothing on the surface, even the sky lights have shifted. But the most changed are the apes, and they have evolved into an organization – a civilisation! – and to have risen from their primitive origins to such advancements… I wonder if our two peoples can at last co-exist.'

The Man shifts his position slightly and leans towards me. 'You believe that those primitives are worth trusting, after how they injured you?'

My hand caresses my side and my talons probe the torn edges of my skin, ripped open by the soldier's weaponry in the caves. 'I feel that if our situations were reversed, my people would have attacked the evolved apes in equal measure – we did so once. And more… one of the evolved apes – a scientist – rescued me from the searches of the soldiers sent to attack us and has promised to return me to the caves so that I may receive the necessary care to save my life. It… he… has been helpful to me. I trust him.'

The Man sits silent and unmoving before me, his body a silhouette in the darkness. Then, he turns his head slowly to one side, and through the soft light in the room, I see the corners of his mouth rise again and his white teeth gleam.

'Ah, my friend, I hate to shatter your noble illusions, but your ape scientist is not as altruistic as you wish to believe. Can you stand?'

'Yes,' I speak, uncertain to the meaning of my companion's intent.

'Excellent; come with me.'

As I brace myself against the cool wall behind me and lift myself up, the Man motions for silence as he walks to the doorway. He produces a strange, black, tube-shaped device from within his equally coloured skins and points this at the door's handle. A quick, bright, burst of reddish-pink light flares from the end of the tube and the handle disappears. I wonder for a moment if this Man's powers are not so unlike my own.

The door silently swings open. At my side, the Man whispers to me.

'Your ape friend has another visitor at the moment. I think that you should be aware of their conversation.'

I lean out through the doorway and listen to the voices filtering through the building. One is new to me: softer and higher toned than any of the others I have heard before. The other belongs to my protector, and what he says arrests my attention and holds it fast.

'Unless I get it back to the caves it will die, and I won't take it back until it tells me what I want to know.'

The conversation ends. I see the other visitor leave the dwelling but it does not see me. Then I see nothing at all; my eyes close tight upon the thoughts raging within me. Betrayal. Deceit. Murder. My rescuer, my protector, he… it… prefers its own advance over my life. But why? I have no answer and within moments I do not know what to think but I know that inside I feel cold… and rage.

The Man speaks again to me. His whisper vibrates harshly in my auditory canals.

'Disappointing to say the least, I know. I marvel that the Doctor ever debases himself to conspire with these petty primitives. Still, now do you see? The apes have not evolved; have not improved with time and experience. No, they have merely created new ways to plunder, attack, and destroy all that they see. Tell me; is this then a race worth preserving, worth surviving?'

The Man's words fans the flames raging in my heart. His voice fills my mind with all-consuming purpose. My eyes snap open – all three of them. In the burning red of my third eye, I see the Man's face for the first time and his eyes burn back into mine.

'It's time to take back what's yours.'

Something breaks inside of me and I run. I hear the Man's voice echoing behind me in delight. I rush forward down the corridor. I turn a corner. I see the ape sitting in a chair. It sees me and fear erupts upon its face. Then I see it in the red of my sights. It writhes in agony upon the chair. In a very few moments, it is over. The ape is dead and empty.

I hear the sound of footsteps behind me and I turn. It is the Man, his mouth still lifted upwards as he examines the scene before him.

'Well done, my friend. Your troubles are all behind you now.'

Suddenly, I feel confused and my thoughts begin to cloud. Then I realise something important.

'You… you knew the meaning of the ape's intent for me before it spoke it. How?'

'Oh… I may have spoken with it for a moment or two before I visited you. Just to clarify its position on things.'

The Man suddenly sounds very indifferent to me and my confusion grows. Then I hear a sound: exactly that made by the vehicles used by the apes. The Man rushes to the transparent portal within the wall and he peers outside. His mouth rises higher at what he sees.

'Perfect timing as ever, Doctor.' The Man moves away from the transparency and stares at me. 'Farewell. Enjoy your new world. You've earned it.'

As my thoughts meander within the thickening haze within my mind, I call out to the Man as he is departing. 'Wait, you must stay. If the Doctor is here then we must stand together.'

'Oh no, he is your difficulty at the moment, not mine. I cannot afford to be seen just yet. But soon the Doctor will know that his Master is watching over him.'

The Master retreats into the shadows. There is strange sound and I see him no more. My mind blackens…and then clears as quickly as it dims. I stand stricken and uncertain. I turn around and look down. I see the scientist – the one who rescued me – lying upon a chair. Somehow I know that it… he… is dead. And somehow I know that I killed him. Outside, through the transparency, I see a light approaching the dwelling. I run to the shadows and hide in the darkness. I feel afraid, and alone.

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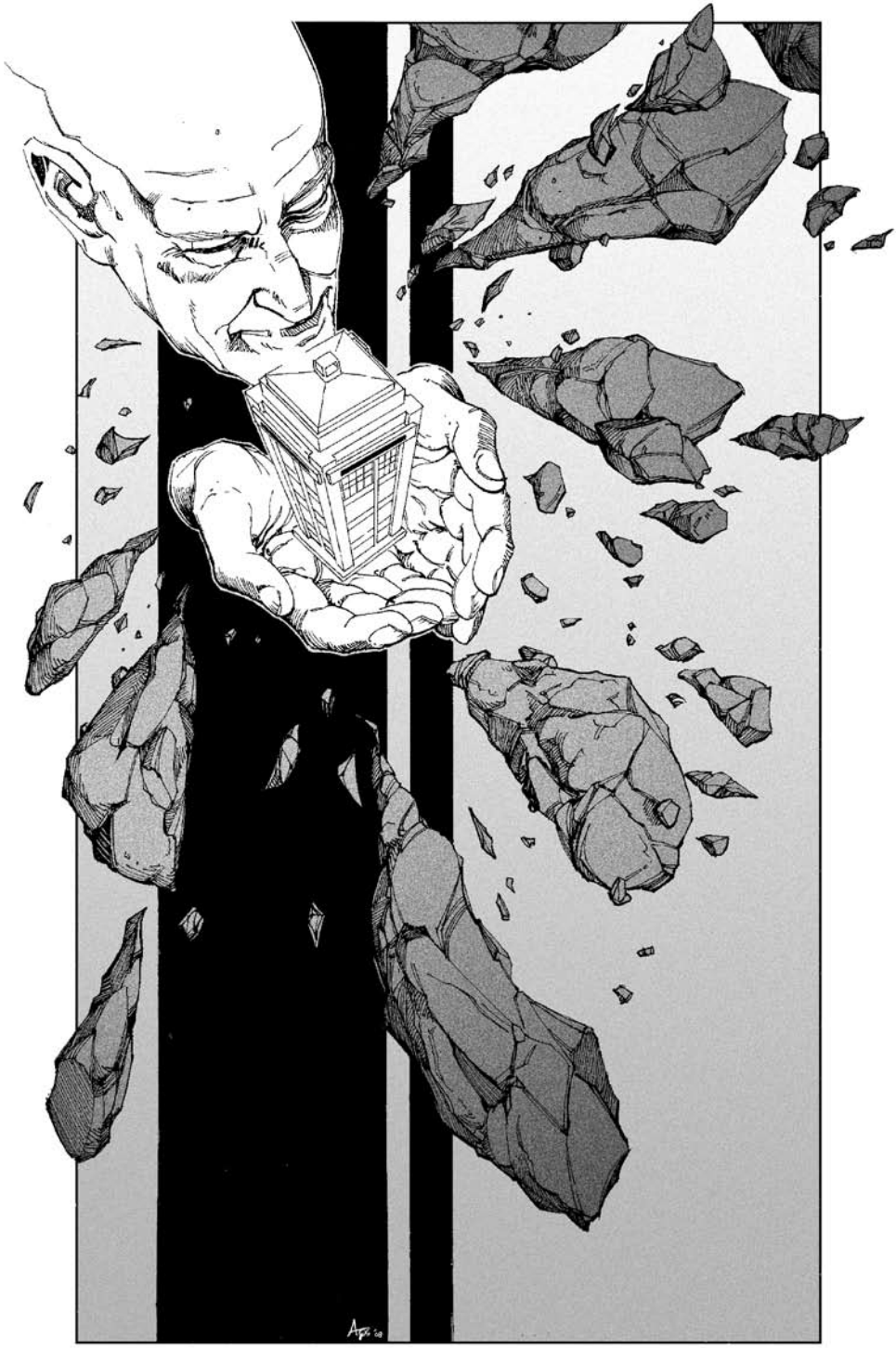
When the Doctor entered the home of Dr Quinn, he could not help but sense a familiar presence in the air, but failed to notice that the home's lovely old grandfather clock had mysteriously vanished.

He never learned why the Silurian seemed so afraid.



Manchusis Psychosis

Roger Clark

I first met Craig at a Writer's Gate *event in Peterborough where, for some reason, I remember ending up sitting on a panel and interviewing him and some of the other writers there (although that could easily have been another event!). From then on, it seemed like our paths tended to cross through other people, mainly our illustrious editor; Adrian. I tried to piece this story together using elements from what I knew of Craig; stories he and others told me of his life (no, I'm not going to say which bits!), favourite Doctor and so on.*

Add to that some obvious connections to his Doctor Who *work and there you go. I've no idea if he'd have liked the following but I'm sure he wouldn't have held back on his true views! Enjoy!*

So, you are here again. I still don't know where here is, but I can guess.

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After all those years of wanting to spend time with you, we finally have had day upon day in each other's company. But tell me why you want me to tell my story. Why do you need to know?

I have been through my childhood, my youth and my early working life. You have listened intently and you did not flinch when I described my feelings for you on the first day that we met. If only I had the courage to tell you that at the time. What a fool I was, to spend so much time with you and get so close and yet not have the courage to tell you of my deepening love. I guess that you have now realised how much it hurt when our weekends together were cut short by you moving back home to Castlandingstand.

I remember the way you used to look at me, the time we ended up dancing together, the times we fell asleep together. All the time, I wondered if you knew. It was these memories and the questions that I could not answer that meant that my life was empty when you left.

That was when I joined the High Order of Lazarus Intent and began to study under their guidance. I have told you of my studies with them but it wasn't serious at the time. Not until I was sure in my mind that we would never be together. I was still keeping my hopes high that you would realise my feelings for you and that you would make the first move. When you invited me to stay with you and see some of your country, it meant so much to me, yet I still could not tell you of my feelings. You know how shy I am, and

how I put others thoughts before my own; all those people who just wouldn't understand me being with someone from Castlandingstand. How stupid of me.

I remember those romantic nights on this and my second visit. Perhaps they didn't mean as much to you. Did you ever have an idea of my feelings?

∞

There is silence. You don't answer my question. Does that mean…? No, I cannot torment myself with the thought. You are not leaving and you are not angry when I tell you how much you mean to me.

Perhaps you did realise.

∞

When I returned home again I realised that I would never be able to tell you and yet I came so close. It was the letter I sent to you just before I joined the Order to become an apprentice. I hinted more strongly than ever, still not having the courage to tell you direct. Then the letter came back telling me that we would always be friends… and between the lines you seemed to say that it would never be anything more.

Did I get that wrong? I hope not, as that is what made me throw myself into the Order and rise through the ranks. I needed something, if I could not have you; something to busy the mind.

How I missed your sparkling personality in my enforced seclusion from you; your wonderful hair and those beautiful, intelligent eyes. How I longed to kiss your full red lips and caress your thighs.

It was not to be and if this was so I could not carry on. As I have said, that is why I threw myself into my studies and my life in the Order. When I did think of you, I told myself that everything I did there was for you. I knew you would be proud, even if you could not love me. Nothing distracted me and that is why I devoted myself to the peace and harmony that we had on the Redbrick Moon.

Our small planet was easy to tame and put at peace. Becoming Guardian of the Grand Order held power over many countries and I had no problem telling them to stop their petty squabbles. Yet, over all the years I could still not find the courage to speak to you and that is why we lost touch.

Yet, here you are. After all I have been through, I find myself here with you asking for my life story. What I did, where I went, who I met. There is so much I don't understand about you and where we are.

Some of my words may be strange to you, as I have learnt even more since I left our small colonial outpost on the Redbrick Moon. The understanding, and the phrases, come easily to me now and I will explain them if necessary as I tell you the end of my tale.

That is what you are here for isn't it? Can we talk more about us later? This will be the end of my tale and I have nowhere to go.

Please don't hang your head. You need not be sad. Here, let me round up my tale.

∞

As you know, I had brought peace to the Redbrick Moon. I was now Guardian and I had started to spend my time observing our original home in space, Artaris. The inhabitants of the nation of Excelis had become ever more warlike since they built the Redbrick Moon, and then came the day of judgement.

I remember the morning well. There were a number of novices following me around, led by Sareena. Sareena always made me laugh. Small, and full of trivia: so much so that it bubbled to the surface incessantly in a stream of verbal diarrhoea. My name was used like it was going out of fashion, and today was no exception.

'Manchusis, Manchusis,' he ran up to me bowing. 'Novice Dendea reports activity in Excelis.' He then proceeded to tell the novices of what a nice person I am and so on. How I hate the term 'nice'.

Everyone has always said that of me. None of them knew that my involvement in the peace movement across the planet was purely a distraction. Something to stop me thinking of you, or to do something you would have done. Is that being nice?

I headed for the Observatory where the legendary Telescope of Aeternia stood. I know now that this, and many more of our historic treasures, had been left by the Time Lords millennia ago. They meddled slightly in our affairs, before becoming bored and just leaving. Powered by Artron energy, the telescope allowed its user to not only see the planets and peoples of the solar system in which it was located but it also allowed them to feel the moods of the planets: to sense the very life energy itself. It was intoxicating.

∞

I had been watching Artaris for a while. I had hoped that we could eventually traverse the stars and return to the descendants of our ancestors; showing them the error of their ways. You see, I had seen their dazzling but cold architecture, and felt the angry, hateful feelings

of the population. This had helped enlighten me to the core of the Lazarus Intent's beliefs; that of peace. There had been many directions chosen for the Lazarus Intent over the centuries, many interpretations of the sacred texts.

This helped me give examples to the people in my negotiations. Showing them the dangers that poverty could breed: moving them away from war and greed. As we moved towards worldwide peace, the people of Excelis built frightening weapons of fire that could destroy whole cities.

On one of my visits I could sense a new factor had arrived in Excelis: an ancient but essentially good force. One complicated by sadness and deep, deep secrets. I didn't know it at the time but the Artron energy of the telescope was being drawn nearby: drawn to a newly arrived source of Artron energy on Artaris. It was called a TARDIS.

Again, you ask how I know of Artron energy and such things as the name of the TARDIS and you will ask how I know of the Doctor too. All will become apparent; I promise I will tell you. You'll see shortly. Listen.

∞

As I focused on the TARDIS, I could see that the Doctor had just entered. I could see many things at the same time. I saw the wonderful wildlife. Remember our scaramonts? You had one as a pet… There's a similar creature on Artaris - its name is similar too – they have a longer nose, and a longer tail, but still have those wonderful big brown eyes. Two scaramonter leapt in and out of the grass, enjoying every breath; such happy creatures.

Elsewhere, a child admired a beautiful flower. A glacier slowly carved wonderful shapes in the rock. A stunning volcano threw up bright colours of molten rock. A bird soared high in the sky. I felt a kiss between lovers and the proud admiration of parents.

It was such a shock when the bright flash ripped through me. I was momentarily blinded but I felt the planet cry out in pain and sadness. My sight returned quickly and I wish it had not.

I saw bolts of fire that fell from the sky, scorching all. The air itself burned, and the cacophony of sound was deafening. I felt such pain. Not just my own, but that of the entire planet. Excelis, Calaan, Krachan, all the nations of Artaris, and all the peoples, burning.

The scaramonger cooked in their own juices. The child turned to ash and the glacier melted, flooding the plain below before evaporating in the heat as the rock below melted. The volcano was flattened and the bird was consumed by the burning atmosphere. There was only pain and death, blanketing the planet.

The energy from the telescope was linked to that of the TARDIS again. As the

flames licked at the base of the TARDIS, the time corridor opened above, and I could not draw back. I could not move away. The TARDIS machinery wheezed and groaned its way back into the space-time vortex.

Energy from the vortex fuzzed with that of the nuclear explosions from the destruction that was engulfing Artaris. In turn, it flowed through me and the feedback reached my beloved home. It reached the Redbrick Moon, and my beloved home shattered.

∞

In that split second I saw Artaris consumed in a fire of hate and destruction, and I also saw that raw energy destroy my home, my world. I saw it destroy you.

How did you escape? I saw the Redbrick Moon split in two, its atmosphere released out and off into space. Yet here you are.

So, you are giving me that sad expression again. You aren't going to tell me. Well, I shall finish my story like you want, and then you can tell me your story. Promise me that? If I am not right, you promise to tell me? We shall see whether it is needed. Let me move on.

∞

This is the bit that I promised to tell you earlier. I shall tell you everything, and then you shall question me more; I am sure to be using words that you shouldn't know. TARDIS for instance… TARDIS. What a wonderful word.

It stands for Time And Relative Dimensions In Space and you may have gathered that it is a machine. More than a machine, it can travel in time and space. Think of it as one of those magical Arantian Carriages from our childhood stories.

As the TARDIS began its flight through time and space, it dragged me with it. I found myself in the space-time vortex. The blues and reds – my mind interpreted them thus, though I am sure they are in truth something far stranger – swirled around me for what seemed like a lifetime. After a while, I was able to gather my thoughts, and I realised that I was no longer corporeal. I had left my body behind; it had been incinerated on the Redbrick Moon, and was gone. I existed as a being created through the Artron energy mixing with the radiation from the nuclear holocaust and that from within the space-time vortex itself.

∞

At that realisation I began to panic. I was being dragged by this strange craft, and I did not know what to do. I could still feel the controls of the telescope even though it had gone. I tried to focus in on the TARDIS and found myself linked to its database.

It was here that I learnt of new worlds, and new words. New concepts. The TARDIS, the space-time vortex, and the Doctor himself. I could not take much more. I was going mad. The amount of knowledge in there was overwhelming; more than a mortal brain such as I used to have, could cope with. The life I had led really meant nothing to me. I had seen such death and destruction and now I was being overloaded with information. It is here that I have to confess something to you.

∞

I went mad.

∞

It is as simple as that. Even though the TARDIS showed me what the Doctor had done on his visits everywhere – all those good things across the universe, across time – I hated him. My mind had turned and I blamed him. Death and destruction followed him everywhere. It had followed him to Artaris and thence to the Redbrick Moon.

I hated him and I would make him pay. Yes, me; the peacemaker, the nice man, the Guardian of the Lazarus Intent… That mild-mannered, loveable man who brings peace, and gets rid of poverty: I would destroy the Doctor.

In my confusion I lost my grip on the TARDIS and I swirled around in the vortex consumed in my own madness; writhed in anger and murderous intent.

I was caught in the wake of the TARDIS which was now taking me with it out of the vortex to a new planet. The Doctor's favourite: the planet Earth. I was thrown violently as it arrived on a busy thoroughfare. I remembered that I tried to look at myself and saw that I glittered as I flew through the air.

I somehow knew that the only way that I could get to the Doctor was to become corporeal again. I didn't care for any creature on this planet. Why should I? I just wanted my revenge on this Doctor that calls himself a Lord of Time.

∞

I shudder now to think of what I did next.

∞

I saw a beggar and headed towards him. I can't remember his name now. I think it was Pierre. It was so long ago. A country called France during a bloody revolution that the Doctor had visited on more than one occasion.

The beggar was an innocent and, a few seconds after I knew of his existence, he was dead. I took over his body and forced his essence out. Over time, I found I could control my powers more and more. I suppose some of them were things left over from whatever mechanics controlled the telescope.

I found that I could read minds to some degree. I also found that it was easier to take over bodies and hitch lifts without killing the occupant. It could also be interesting. Measuring up their little, lives and whether I thought them worthy of making footprints on this new home planet of mine.

By the time I had found how to control the body of the beggar, the TARDIS had gone. Then I realised that I had another chance as part of my revenge. This Doctor would return to Earth. I knew that from the TARDIS databanks and the record of his journeys. I knew some rough details of where he would be and when.

I decided to find him and now my revenge would be two-fold. I would inhabit him and I would take his time-craft back to the Redbrick Moon and avert the catastrophe. I would stop myself from ever going near that telescope. I would save everyone, maybe even save the people of Artaris.

I also began to dwell on what I had done with my life on the Redbrick Moon and I chastised myself for not telling you of my feelings. I longed for companionship. But I could not share my new life with anyone but you.

∞

Those years on Earth saw no end to my madness as I moved from body to body. I laid plan after plan but my mind was too addled. Time after time, I missed the Doctor. I saw different Doctors and different companions. I will not bore you with the details of these plans that failed so miserably. It is embarrassing anyway. I just failed. Doctor after Doctor came and went. Some I saw more than once. However, I did notice his companions and I realized that they were the way to get through to the Doctor. That is when I remembered 'UNIT' from the TARDIS logs.

I had tried to get near the Doctor while in the body of a UNIT recruit but that proved harder that I thought. There were reassignments and always calls to distant regions to fight the invader of the week. Another tactic was necessary. I needed to get to his

companion.

Night after night I observed one called Jo Grant, and there was the pattern I needed. Every first Wednesday of the month, Jo would head far across town to a pub where she could be assured that there were no UNIT regulars to drop in unannounced to spoil her quiet get-away-from-it-all drink.

By this time, I had found myself the body of a detective in Scotland Yard. I had chosen it carefully so that it could open doors and not draw suspicion. Those doors that wouldn't open for the ID card were knocked in by my boots. I somehow came to enjoy the life of a detective in this period.

It didn't seem odd for a person like this to drown his sorrows in the local pub either. That is where I started to make myself known to Miss Grant. She made it easy for me by spilling her drink down my best suit very early on. She was quite a small girl really and I could have held her easily. Why I did not grab her in the street or any other place is now beyond me. When madness takes its grip, it does not do so logically. Perhaps I should tell you of some plans made by other madmen. Plans I learned from the TARDIS' records of the Doctor's travels.

I suspect that you already know of them. I can see from your smile. How I have missed that smile. Jo had a nice smile but it wasn't as nice as yours. My feelings have not changed since the day we met, and you smiled at me across the meeting room.

Jo kept smiling at me across the pub. After that first meeting we began to talk and she began to trust me. Within a few months she was meeting me every week she could get away from her duties. Just for a chat of course. I think it was a release for her. She half-mentioned her colleagues and her work but never exactly what she did. She was the sort to let things slip, however, but I pretended not to notice.

I felt sorry for her at one point, as she obviously liked someone there, but I shut my emotions away and settled on a date to put my plan into action. I remember that it was raining and everyone was soaked to the skin. The whole place had that sea water smell about it.

Jo certainly had more to drink that night than I remember her doing previously. That made things easier at first as I leaned in to her as she turned to tell me something after watching the two regulars fail at hitting anything worthwhile on a dart board. As she turned to me I remember thinking that I would hopefully be seeing you again soon. I held the back of Jo's head gently as I kissed her slowly. She began to struggle and I remembered the plan. I swapped bodies there and then.

This was not like any other change I had gone through before and I realised how much alcohol Jo had actually had. I remember seeing my old body asleep on the seat and thinking that I needed to get a train. I stumbled across the stricken form, picking up my

new belongings and fastening my coat as I went.

I don't remember leaving the pub but I remember arriving at a train station. I was dripping wet with the rain and the platform was surrounded in a white haze. Jo's thoughts were coming to the fore too. There was something about the Brigadier and making sure Sergeant Benton was fed on the next watch. Then I lost consciousness.

I awoke to a throbbing head, sitting in the front of a UNIT jeep being driven by Sergeant Benton, who smiled when he saw that my eyes had opened. He explained that I had been taken in by the police, who had given me the chance to make one phone call. I suppose I was lucky they did in the state I must have been in.

Sergeant Benton was quite amused at how I had gotten myself into trouble. He was being nice, considering that the Brigadier had woken him up in the middle of the night, accusing him of getting me drunk and leaving me on a train station. He saw the funny side of it. All I could think of was that I was on my way to UNIT HQ and my long-awaiting reunion with the Doctor.

The drive was long and cold and there were only a few lights on when we finally arrived there. The long drive gave me the time I needed to assert complete control over the body I now had, and I asked Benton where the Doctor was.

As usual, he wasn't sleeping. Tapping into Jo's mind, I knew that he would be working in his laboratory. Benton would not let me see him, thinking it part of my drunken state. I let him manoeuvre me through one door after another so that I could quickly steal his gun from his holster.

Part of me wanted to shoot him on the spot. Whether it was something of Jo, or whether it was part of my old self, I decided not to. Instead I waited for my chance and hit him over the head with it instead. He dropped to the ground and lay still. I don't know why, but I also checked to see if he was all right. He was still breathing and would recover quite quickly so I rushed to the lab.

The Doctor there was a tall man with a fine head of white hair. His clothes showed him to be the eccentric that he was, while the lines of his face (and I have to say, his rather large nose!) gave the air of authority that the stories of him repeatedly spoke of.

'Hello, Jo' he said in his deep, gravelly voice as I entered through the double doors. The laboratory wasn't quite as big as I expected and was quite sparse when it came to equipment. Not much was needed I suppose as, standing up the corner, was the strangely welcoming shape of the TARDIS. That reassuring blue box seemed to hum louder as I approached the Doctor. It was a soothing hum and I think I now know why. The Doctor didn't notice but just kept bobbing his head up and down from a Bunsen burner and some foil that he was burning something on. 'You're up late, Jo, do excuse me while I carry on my little experiment,' he said as I got nearer.

I couldn't help but ask what he was doing, as he was now staggering himself as the smoke from the foil was breathed in. He told me that he was testing some anti-radiation drugs the Thals had given him a couple of lifetimes back and told me not to get too close to the fumes.

∞

I should have realized the danger to me personally but, by this time, I was so close to him. I flung myself on him and he fell to the ground with a startled expression on his face. I began to leave Jo but could not seem to enter the Doctor's body. He wasn't struggling much but as my strength left Jo, he heaved her closer to the fumes from part of the experiment that had been knocked on the floor and she breathed them in.

The Doctor gently laid Jo on the ground and looked at me. He could actually see me. I tried once more to take control of his body but it was blocked to me. He grabbed more of the drugs and set them burning in the foil on the flame.

They seemed to react to me and I grew weak. There was only one chance now and that was to get back to Jo's body. I tried desperately but found that I could not. She had breathed in these drugs too, and now I was trapped. I was too weak to go anywhere else and there was no body to inhabit.

The fumes seem to engulf me. That was when the madness left me. I wanted to apologise to the Doctor and Miss Grant but I couldn't. They would not be able to understand and I was growing weaker and weaker. I was dying as the radiation in my new form was countered by the drugs.

Gradually, the room faded to black and I found myself here with you. That is when you took my hand and soothed my temperament. I think you knew that I was dying and I now know what this has all been about.

∞

Thank you for taking my mind off the inevitable. It won't be long now.

To take the form of the person I loved the most in my life was inspired. The comfort that has given me has been welcome. The Doctor is lucky to have a TARDIS like you. Remember, I have been attached to you before, although that will be in your future of course.

Now that I tell the end of my life story, it becomes obvious to me that I have been drawn once more to the TARDIS. I am not sure whether you have asked for my story out of curiosity, for your databanks, or to soothe my exit from this existence.

You have been a good friend, listening to my ramblings. I can feel parts of me fading away now as whatever is holding me together dissipates. It's the anti-radiation drugs of course: having an effect on the radiation that helped make me what I have become.

Can I ask for two final things? I now realise that the Doctor is essentially a good, peaceful, person, as I was once. I also know that death in the Doctor's world doesn't always mean that I won't come back. I do not want to go through that madness again. I don't want to come back and shatter time and space by saving my planet.

As much as I want to, I know it is wrong. I also don't want to harm the Doctor, or you, my friend, and so I want to make sure that all parts of me are destroyed. Please open a way into the vortex so that I may sit among the time winds without protection. That will make sure that the energies holding my essence together are properly dissolved, freeing me to move on to… whatever comes next for those who pass on.

You smile. I am glad you approve of my plan. I am so tired. I have lost everything and I am left with my memories: the good and the bad. Now they are beginning to fade. I feel so tired.

My second request?

This may be part of the madness still. I know that your form is not real but as you open a route into the vortex for me, could I ask to be held? For a kiss from my love? One last memory to treasure on my last great journey.

∞

I can see the vortex opening up. Isn't it beautiful?

∞

Thank you, my friend. I am leaving you now. It is a strange feeling, one I have not experienced before. I feel calmer than I had expected. I had expected cold, perhaps, rather than calm.

You will have to let go now, my love.

I will love you always.

Always.

Crawlspace

Simon A Forward

Back in 2005, I was a real newcomer to the world of Doctor Who *fandom, but I was lucky enough to be invited to attend the Gallifrey convention in LA and I was even luckier to be in the company of Craig Hinton for the flight over and for much of the time we were there. So not only did I entirely forget my fear of flying, through spending most of the nine-hour flight laughing and joking, but I had a great guide to shepherd me through the whole new and potentially scary experience. To cap it all, we were both scheduled to share a round table discussion and we each brought a writing sample, with a view to possibly reading them out.*

Craig brought the opening chapter of Time's Champion *– his proposed Sixth Doctor regeneration story – while I brought this story that I'd written a week or two beforehand. Craig had obligingly read the story and had enjoyed it. As it turned out, neither of us got to read any of our material at the discussion, largely because we ended up having too good a chat with the handful of attendees. Craig was on top form, holding court, and afterwards he turned to me and apologised for having hogged the spotlight, but a) it suited my shy retiring persona fine, b) he'd actually been really gracious about it, occasionally inviting me to get a word in edgewise and c) he was a pleasure to listen to anyway. We had such a good laugh. Ultimately followed by another flight, with more joking and laughing all the way home.*

So, even though Crawlspace *lacks the sense of humour of a Craig Hinton* Doctor Who *story, it does feature some of the continuity he loved so much and, more importantly, it's a story that is now irrevocably bound up with those memories of Craig.*

Sarah tipped her head back and let the water jet into her face. Eyes shut, she pushed her hands back through wet hair then reached for the shampoo bottle. She fumbled it, opened her eyes. And glimpsed the intruder through the haze of steam.

She backed up; gave a little yelp that caught in her throat.

A spider. She was sharing her shower with a big fat spider. It clung to the top of the cubicle door, huddled in one corner of the frame.

Sarah shivered and suddenly the water was like tiny legs scurrying down her skin. She shrank away, putting as much distance between her and the invader as possible. But her shower cubicle was definitely not bigger on the inside than on the outside. In fact, with the eight-legged thing for company, it was decidedly cramped and her gaze was torn between staying fixed on the horrid thing or hunting around for some means of dealing with it.

Sarah's shoulder bumped the cold tile behind her. And the trapped shriek finally escaped her. Still only a little yelp, but loud enough to make her feel foolish.

Luckily, foolishness and bravery were surprisingly close relatives; so she reached for the showerhead and snatched it from the cradle. Padding forward, she angled the spray up at the offending intruder.

Then had to dance quickly backwards as the animal was dislodged into the shower basin, swirling around in the water and scrabbling frantically, feebly. But there was no feeling sorry for its pathetic efforts; no, Sarah was just plain angry with the thing – how dare it interrupt her shower, her one chance to relax and unwind after a hard day's work conquering blank page after blank page? And now here she was all cold and stressed, all the luxury and warmth of those few quiet moments completely undone. Peace shattered, nerves on edge. Well, here's what you get, Mister Spider, Sarah swore her quiet oath of vengeance, determined to put it well out of her misery.

Bending low, she worked the showerhead around, sluicing the creature closer to the plughole. It scrabbled around some more, objecting desperately to this violent swimming lesson, while Sarah had to perform a swift two-step, hopping backwards to keep the thing from brushing against her toes. As if even the lightest of touch of its legs – or worse, its body – would somehow taint her forever. Like she'd never be rid of the feeling of it crawling on her skin.

A final sluice and she sent it spinning down the chrome-rimmed black hole, lost forever, gone for good. And yet, for long minutes afterwards, standing in the steam while her skin acclimatised once again to the idea that it was actually nice and warm in here, Sarah could still sense it, like the memory of it was still lurking in the cubicle, sharing her shower.

Like her adventures with the Doctor. Gone, but not forgotten.

∞

Sarah stood patiently by while the Doctor fussed over the controls like an attentive horticulturalist nursing his favourite plant back to health. Not that he dressed like any kind of horticulturalist: his attire was always more professorial, with more than a hint of the theatrical; and Sarah was fairly sure some of his gestures were designed to show off those fancy frilled cuffs of his, poking out from the sleeves of his velvet jacket. And not that the TARDIS was a plant, although the Doctor had suggested that she was organic. And not that 'she' was ill exactly either, but she had been suffering from these occasional power cuts ever since they'd left the planet of the Exxilons. The ship had suffered a severe power drain there and the Doctor seemed to think that the old girl was just taking her time getting back on her feet.

Not that she had feet. But Sarah did, and she was getting tired of standing around

on hers. Especially as the Doctor appeared to have fixed the latest blackout and, crisis over, they seemed to be on their way again.

But the Doctor was still flicking switches, going for a brisk walk around to another panel, patting this display, and returning to the first panel to pay it even more attention. Occasionally, he would vary the routine enough to convince her that he wasn't actually a hologram on some sort of loop, but it was still getting more than a little bit boring.

Silence stretched and Sarah rocked on her heels, hoping a little movement of her own might catch the Doctor's eye. But the hope was even thinner than her patience. He just carried on the same dance around his beloved console, adding a few more furrows to the already impressive collection on that brow of his. 'So,' she said, without so much as a preparatory clearing of her throat, 'now everything seems fixed, where are you taking me?'

Finally, he looked up and smiled and he'd made that seamless transition of his from professor to showman: there was a lively gleam in his eye and that hair was like silver-white candy floss under the TARDIS lights. 'Somewhere nice,' he said.

Sarah huffed, her fists bunching up at her sides as she advanced on him. 'Oh, Doctor, why do you always have to be so vague? For someone with such a finely honed intellect, you might try being a little more precise.'

'Ah, well, the secret is knowing precisely when to be vague.' He gave the side of his beaky nose a single affable tap with his finger.

'That's nonsense and you know it. Anyway, what secret? It's so annoying.'

'The secret of aggravating you.' His earnestness had her fooled for a second, but he cracked another smile. Then shook his head. 'Honestly, Sarah, you would think I was doing it deliberately to frustrate you.'

'Then why do you do it?'

'Doesn't it occur to you I might have my reasons? Rather nobler ones, as it happens. If I told you where we were going, then it could hardly be much of a surprise, could it?'

Sarah's shoulders slumped. 'Oh,' she said. 'You wanted to surprise me.' That was the Doctor: from infuriating to sweet in the blink of an eye. Time for a modest helping of humble pie. 'Well, that's very kind of you, Doctor. I should know to think before I open my big mouth. But at least, could you give me some sort of hint before we get there. I'd like to have some idea of what to wear.'

The Doctor was back, all of a sudden, dipping over the console to make some minute adjustment – or to flick a speck of dust from one of the contacts, for all Sarah knew. She gave a modest, 'Ahem.'

He looked up.

'What should I wear?' she prompted. 'Something light? Something fancy? Something casual?'

'Oh, that's easy.' His eyes sparkled. 'Something nice.'

Sarah gave up with a huff. 'Well, I'm going to change anyway, and you can match our destination to my outfit,' she declared, but he wasn't listening. She did a smart about-turn and marched off, thinking about the more extreme costumes the TARDIS wardrobe had to offer.

She was halfway along the corridor when the lights cut out and she could hear the ship grinding to a halt. They were dead in the vortex. Again.

Honestly, the old girl was getting as aggravating as the Doctor.

Sarah shook her head and pressed on. Picking out an outfit in the dark might be a bit of a lucky dip, but it was just as far back to the control room and anyway all she could contribute was a lot more standing around. The gathering gloom seemed to suggest she shouldn't be wandering around on her own, but Sarah was undeterred. One of the pluses of her adventures with the Doctor, one of the benefits of being scared lifeless by real monsters on an all-too frequent basis, was that she was steadily schooling herself that shadows couldn't hurt her. Shadows were just a cloak for the real horrors, and here in the TARDIS – even a darkened TARDIS – she knew she was safe.

So when she glimpsed a movement in the corner of her eye, she knew it had to be a lie. A trick of the dark. But she stopped in her tracks all the same, a tightness fastened around her heart. She scanned the banks of roundels adorning the walls on either side. To her right; her left. Behind her. If anything really had moved, then it had to be the Doctor, but she could only voice his name in a half-whisper. And he gave no answer. The shadows gave no answer.

Then she saw it.

One of the shadows hauled its body from one of the roundels and dropped to the floor. Hugging the base of the wall, it scuttled away.

A trick of the dark.

∞

What had gotten into her? Normally, when Sarah laid her head on the pillow, she was out like a light. Tonight, she'd made all the right moves – flicked off the bedside lamp, snuggled down comfortably and closed her eyes – but sleep was keeping her waiting. Now her eyes were stubbornly open, trying to out-stare the dark.

There were nights when too many ideas crowded her head, all clamouring for attention, but for such occasions she kept a pen and pad in her bedside drawer, so she

could jot them down, put them onto the page and out of her head. But there were none of them tonight; nothing pressing to be written. There were only vague, shapeless thoughts like the shadows around her bedroom. Familiar and strange.

Sarah huffed and rolled over, tugging the bedclothes tight around her shoulder. She lay there staring at a different set of shadows. She sighed. And growled. She was going to have to get up, wasn't she?

Pitter patter.

She froze.

Minute, tickling steps crept across the pillow behind her head. They stopped. Sarah's heart beat loud and fast and she almost wished it would stop so she could listen for the steps again. Then somehow, above the thump of her own blood, she heard it: microscopic, feeling its way closer to her hair.

Sarah screamed and scrambled for the far side of the bed. Leaping out, she tossed back the bedclothes. She grabbed at the bedside lamp, snapping it on, and flooding the room with light while her eyes scanned the pillows.

Nothing.

The headboard.

Nothing.

The covers.

Nothing.

Her heart still hammered away and she clamped a hand to her chest. She could hardly breathe. Getting a hold of her nerves, she dragged the covers all the way off, exposing the sheet and scouring every inch. That vast expanse of white where nothing could hide.

∞

The lights were back on and the shadows no longer had a home. 'I saw something, Doctor. I know I did.'

Give the Doctor credit, he had come running quickly. He stood now with a comforting hand on each of her shoulders, looking past her down the empty, bright stretch of TARDIS corridor. 'I believe you,' he said.

Sarah turned. That was the last thing she'd expected to hear. Maybe because she didn't quite believe herself. 'You do?'

'Yes, I'm rather afraid I do.'

His shining eyes looked oddly dilated and Sarah's heart sank. 'You've seen it too, haven't you?' The truth hit home like a slow arrow. 'That's what's had you so preoccupied. Over your precious controls.'

The Doctor nodded tightly. 'I've been trying to isolate it, track it down.'

'But why didn't you say anything?' She almost felt like hitting him.

The Doctor flexed his features with a measure of awkwardness. 'I didn't want to alarm you. Besides, I'd only glimpsed something.' She knew that tone, and fixed him with her best journalistic stare. 'Well, all right, several times,' he owned up. 'Several times too many. But I couldn't be sure I wasn't imagining things.'

'You? You don't imagine things.'

'Don't I?' He arched a brow, then let it fall. 'Well, apparently not. And now you've seen it too, so apparently neither of us do.' He gave her a friendly pat. 'Come on, let's go and find some torches. In case the lights go again – while we're hunting this thing.'

'Hunting?' Sarah didn't like the sound of that. 'Do we have to?'

'We can't have intruders running about the TARDIS, now can we?' He tried a smile on for size. 'Stowaways.'

Sarah got the joke, but she didn't feel much like laughing. Or even making a dig back. As the Doctor set off down the corridor, she could still see his smile; and again the gleam in his eye had seemed strangely watered down, his expression too much like bravado. And not very convincing. She steeled herself and set off after him, knowing how quickly being alone could magnify in a space the size of the TARDIS interior.

∞

Sarah sat up reading. Nestled on the sofa and not quite ready to go back to her bedroom. She'd wasted a full half hour hunting for the thing, like a woman possessed. She'd plumped the pillows and hurled them aside; she'd searched under the bed, pressed her head to the wall to peer into the gap between the wardrobe and the wall. Until, finally, she'd given up, headed for the kitchen, and put the kettle on, telling herself she was being stupid. But, so what, there was no-one around to see it and even if she was the only person up at two a.m. seeking solace in a rubbishy romance novel, then, well, it wasn't the end of the world.

She flipped a page. Scanning the words, but not really reading.

A shadow scuttled across the corner of her eye.

She turned cold. And shrank a little deeper into the sofa as her gaze fastened on the shape squatting on the rug in front of the fireplace.

Spider.

Just an ordinary house spider. But big. And its shape crept into her and lurked there and wouldn't leave her alone.

Well, she wasn't going to let it beat her.

Slowly, Sarah laid her book to rest on the cushion beside her. Then unfurled her

legs and set her bare foot on the carpet. Suddenly wishing she had brought her slippers from the bedroom. And watching the spider all the while.

As her toes dipped into the pile, like they were testing the water, the spider didn't budge. It just watched and waited.

Waiting for Sarah to make her move.

∞

After long forays up and down corridors, Sarah trailing in his wake all the way and struggling to keep up, the Doctor found the crack in the TARDIS wall, where the darkness seeped out. 'Good grief,' he muttered. As he ran his fingers experimentally down one edge, the power cut out once again.

And despite fully expecting it to happen at any moment, Sarah gave a start.

The Doctor paid her no heed. He was too thoroughly absorbed with the fissure, the wound in the TARDIS wall, and he probed the space with his fingers. Deeper furrows colonised his brow. And a strange pallor took over his complexion.

'Doctor?'

The Doctor pulled at the edge of the cleft. And the TARDIS wall parted like wet tissue paper or –

'Like cobweb.' He held up his hand, where some of the material had stuck to his fingers. He looked almost as revolted as Sarah felt, and was a moment wondering where to wipe it, before finally, reluctantly, settling on his jacket. Sarah watched the gooey smear cling to the velvet.

The Doctor poked the torch into the hollow and beat it about, easily breaking a wider gap in the membrane and opening a path through the cobweb wall. Into darkness.

'We're not going in there?'

'I told you, Sarah. I have to. Whatever this is, I can't give it free run of the TARDIS.'

'I said *we*. And anyway, why not? There's plenty of room. Why can't we just leave it? It goes about its business all the way down here, we go about ours.'

'And never the twain shall meet?' Even before the Doctor had spoken, Sarah knew how ridiculous she was sounding. But if she let her eyes drift into that darkness, she only felt the fear. And that was fuel for any argument against venturing in there, no matter how weak. 'No,' countered the Doctor, 'I don't think so. And what if the twain do meet, Sarah? What then?'

There was fire and determination in the Doctor as he studied her. But it was tinged with something else, something that undermined him as well as Sarah's nerve. It

couldn't be fear, not in the Doctor. But Sarah shrank from it as though it was. She had forgotten: whatever was in there, the Doctor had been looking for it for some time.

'I don't know,' she trembled.

'No. Exactly. And neither do I. And with the power drains continuing at their current rate, the best we can do is limp on our way, stopping and starting. And I don't know about you, but if we really are going to go somewhere nice, then I'd rather we got there sooner, wouldn't you?' He smoothed the lecture over with a smile.

More bravado, a sheen to coat the Doctor's gaze. But it was enough. Just.

He favoured her with a squeeze of her arm, then turned to the fissure, which was now a great big tear in the TARDIS. Then, shining the torch ahead of him, he pushed his way through into the tunnel beyond.

The dark swallowed him up and Sarah, nervously, followed.

∞

When Sarah returned to the living room, she came armed. She hoped the intruder would get a good look at her expression and know she meant business. She pulled the hoover in after her and looked around.

But the intruder was gone. It had strayed from the rug and was now roaming somewhere in the dark blue of the carpet.

Suddenly, Sarah was vulnerable again and the soft pile under her feet felt distinctly unfriendly.

∞

It was like no part of the TARDIS Sarah had ever seen. And no part of her she ever wanted to see again.

The corridor twisted away ahead like broken bones, the marrow sucked out of them. Their torch beams bounced off the walls, jutting out at excruciating angles, and the ubiquitous roundels bulged outwards like inflamed blisters, some of them burst and weeping dark liquids. In places, the walls exuded web-like strands, black and glistening, strung across their path and sticking to Sarah's face and hair – no matter that the Doctor was forging ahead of her. Sarah had the queasy idea that the tangled strands were reforming behind them as they passed further into the darkness.

The light from the fissure, all she could see of the TARDIS she knew, bled impotently into the nightmare passage and made no impression. The darkness was complete and wished to remain that way. Greedily, it drank down the light from the torches and

leached the beams of all their strength.

The discs of light bounced around like pale spectres. Lost in absolute night.

Sarah screamed as more wet strands – like blood-soaked hair – brushed her cheek.

'Doc-tor,' she half choked out the word. 'I can't go on.'

'We have to, Sarah. Look around you.'

'I'd really – rather – not,' she stammered out.

'Look at what it's doing. It's reconfiguring the TARDIS. Bad enough that we have something wandering around down here. Let alone reshaping her to its own design. I told you, I won't stand for it. I'll give this intruder a piece of my mind, when I catch up with it, I'll tell you that much.'

'I thought,' she said pointedly, 'you said nothing could break into the TARDIS.'

'It can't. Ordinarily. And maybe it didn't *break* in.' There was a pause where all she could hear was the Doctor's footsteps receding ahead of her. 'Now, come on.'

And Sarah forced herself on, wondering what sort of intruder didn't need to break in. She had no answers though. But she was beginning to appreciate that sometimes the shadows were more frightening than what they concealed. Infinitely so.

Especially when the shadows had shape and substance.

Especially when they twitched.

∞

Sarah tightened her grip on the vacuum cleaner tube. A touch of metal. Advancing into the room, she searched in hurried, panicked glances, not even thinking about what the neighbours might make of the sound of hoovering at two in the morning.

Her eyes followed the skirting around, between the bookshelves and cabinets. Nothing. She strained to listen, wondering if, in the silence, even the tiny pitter-patter across the expanse of carpet might betray its presence. Nothing. She peered to her left, behind the sofa and over in front of it. Nothing. She advanced, step by step, further into the room. Determined. Trembling.

The hoover came to an obstinate halt.

Tearing her attention from the rest of the room was an effort, but she managed a glance over her shoulder. She'd run out of slack, of course. Biting her lip, she swore a good few times in her head and ran to unplug the cable.

Thinking, and seeing in her mind's eye, just how fast a spider could move in the space of a few short seconds.

∞

Asphyxiating blackness. Pressing in on her, trying to smother her. Sarah pushed out with both arms, but the blackness was already too close for that.

Somewhere below her, her torch clattered to what must have been the floor. Somewhere ahead of her, a flashlight beam danced like the ghost of the moon, haunting the night but fading fast. Somewhere ahead of that, part of the darkness sprouted too many legs and scuttled away. And a figure that must have been the Doctor's gave chase.

'Sarah! Come on!'

The voice floated back to her from a million miles away. A message from the stars. Except there were no stars. The night had won.

The greedy darkness swallowed the last of her torchlight and now it turned its attention to her. Something brushed against her, working its way around her, like a predator getting the best angle for a clean bite. Something poured down over her head like a liquid blindfold.

Sarah gasped. But there was no air.

This wasn't real. It wasn't happening.

Somewhere behind her, the fissure, like a hairline fracture of light, was closing up. A wound healing and sealing her inside. The floor at her feet was a crawling mass and sent living shadows swarming up her body. Sarah and her coat of many spiders. While solid darkness, like the night with skin, folded over her from above. And Sarah knew: it meant to swallow her whole.

Doctor! But she couldn't turn the name into sound.

'Sarah! Stay with me!'

The Doctor's orders. Somewhere in the distance. Somewhere in the dark.

Too far away to save her now.

Sarah gasped her last breath. But the darkness, alive, its flesh covered with the finest hairs, wouldn't even grant her that much.

∞

Sarah hurried back with the plug in hand, easing the door closed behind her. No way out, but no escape for her intruder either. Her eyes carried on hunting around as she picked her way across the carpet. Still no sign.

Then she was stooping down beside the telephone desk.

Where it was lying in wait. Lurking over one corner of the socket.

Big and fat and dark. An evil lump of gristle suspended in an eight-legged cradle.

Daring her to come any closer.

Desperate, Sarah reached behind her, scrabbling for the vacuum-cleaner hose. Eyes rooted to the spider. Finally, she had a hold on the pipe and she slid it forward, picking it up and aiming it at the invader. She gave the creature a tentative poke.

And all but screamed as it scampered away behind the desk.

Cutting off the cry before she could really make a fool of herself, Sarah pounced, ramming the plug into the socket then reaching back to fire up the hoover. Let the vacuum cleaner do the screaming. Then with her free hand she yanked the old desk out from the wall. And drove the tube in along the base of the wall.

And stared at the blank stretch of skirting.

Gone. No spider.

'Where did you go?'

Impossible.

Then she remembered:

Crawlspace.

∞

Sarah stirred. Then winced. Light as blinding as her headache stabbed at her closed lids. She lifted a hand to her eyes before attempting to open them.

'Sarah! Lie there and keep your eyes closed, if I were you.'

Funny how the Doctor could make a suggestion sound like a command. She could hear the faint scuff and scrape of his feet on the TARDIS floor, performing his familiar quickstep around the console. His only accompaniment was the steady pulse of the TARDIS, like an electronic purr, but less than contented. Not much of a beat to dance to, but a comforting soundtrack to Sarah's ears. Easy listening. Sarah realised she was lying on the control room floor, her head propped up on a cushion of velvety folds that surely had to be the Doctor's fancy jacket. That simple realisation was a comfort too.

But where was all this light coming from? It was harsh, painful even through her closed lids.

'Doctor, what happened?' No, scrub that. That much was obvious: the Doctor had come back for her, dragged her out of there. Flung her indecorously over his shoulder in a fireman's lift, she didn't much care about the details. Tentatively parting her fingers, she turned her head, searching for any kind of movement in the blaze of light, any clue as to what was going on. 'What's happening? What are you doing?'

'Attacking with the only weapon we have. Light. It's meant a controlled disintegration of part of the TARDIS' internal structure, and converting that matter directly

into light.'

Sarah struggled to sit up. Words like 'controlled' suggested it was entirely safe, but – not the most stunning of surprises – the Doctor's tone, and words like 'disintegration' and 'of the TARDIS' suggested otherwise.

'Sarah! I thought I told you to lie still.'

'You didn't.' Sarah stuck her tongue out. 'You didn't say anything about still.'

Head to one side, she chanced opening her lids the minutest of fractions.

In a split second, through knitted lashes, she glimpsed a world that could never be seen. Drowned in light, it was only ever going to be what she thought she saw. Amid the blaze, she thought she saw the TARDIS wall become translucent. Beyond it, within it, she thought she saw a host of shadows. Teeming, twitching. Crawling.

She shut her eyes up tight, before the glare or the shadows could find a way in. Her head was splitting. Her heart trembled.

She lay back down, deciding to give the Doctor the shock of his life and do what she was told. Ha. That would show him.

If she was going to do this, then she reasoned – not that reason applied to any of this – she would be best taking something of a ritualistic approach. Sarah went about the house switching on every light, every lamp, in a ceremonial flooding of every room.

She was determined.

There would be nowhere to hide. For her or anything else.

∞

When Sarah blinked her eyes open, the lights were back to something like normal levels but they flickered, as though the TARDIS had suffered a breakdown of the nervous variety. The Doctor was hovering over the console, but he must have had at least one eye on her, because he came right over and knelt beside her.

'How are you feeling?'

Sarah preferred not to answer that one. 'Are we out of the woods?'

'I don't think we were ever truly in them,' the Doctor told her.

She struggled to sit up and the Doctor looked set to ease her back down, but he could generally tell when she wasn't in the mood for any argument. So instead, he helped her upright, keeping an arm available to steady her. 'I really do hope you're going to explain that. Slowly,' she said. 'With diagrams.'

The Doctor's smile was slow to form, but all the richer for it. 'Yes, well, I don't know about the diagrams. But if I said monsters from the Id, I think you'd understand well enough.'

'The Id? You mean we imagined the whole - '

'Well, not imagined. Not quite. You see, it's not *our* Id that's been bothering us. It's the TARDIS' subconscious.' He let those young-old eyes roam around the room. 'Crawlspace. If you want to give it a name.'

Sarah gave a shudder. 'I could think of more attractive names.'

'None that describe it so perfectly, I imagine.' His gaze continued to wander, somehow straying far, far beyond the confines of these walls, Sarah was sure. 'The inner spaces of the TARDIS. The same kind of spaces you'd find in your own home, perhaps. Under the bed, behind the wardrobe, the back of the cupboard. Where the shadows reside.'

'Shadows? What shadows? You're telling me the TARDIS is the nervous type?'

'Not as a rule, no. But there are always exceptions.' The lights flickered and died, then recovered again, but a portion of the gloom remained as a mask on the Doctor's face. 'Something's troubling the old girl. Something from my past, perhaps. The shadow of a ghost of a memory of a monster, preying on her subconscious. And, by association, on mine.'

'That doesn't sound like you. Or the TARDIS,' Sarah insisted. 'Neither of you are the sort to get jittery over a few old monsters.'

'Something from my future, then. Something that's coming for me. Soon.'

'That's just morbid.'

'Exactly. Morbid fears are just the kind of thing to be right at home in Crawlspace.' The lights faded, slowly this time, as though discovering new ways to die. 'Horrors from childhood. Portents of doom. They all find a home there.'

'But the light – '

'Sent them back where they belong. Into the shadows. The corners, the spaces between. The nooks and crannies, if you like.'

'They're still on board!' Sarah started. 'And no, no I don't like! So – so what are we going to do about it? There must be some way we can – some way we can fight it. Be rid of it for good.'

The Doctor shook his head. Defeat didn't sit well on those familiar features. He met her gaze head on, bringing one of his best smiles to bear. 'We're going to do what we should have done in the first place. The best thing we can do, to exorcise our demons. We're going to carry on our way, ignore it and hope it goes away.' He stood, proffering a hand to help Sarah onto her feet. 'I'm going to take you somewhere nice.'

Sarah opened her mouth to speak, but she realised he'd stunned her. Good and proper.

'And when you're feeling up to it,' he returned to the console, pausing to throw a

wry grin over his shoulder, 'you can say you told me so.'

∞

Sarah started with a single word.

Spider.

She studied it. Black on white. Watched it take form, the word becoming the thing. Dark, alive, alien and horribly familiar. Too many legs.

Spider - s.

And like that, they multiplied.

Spiders. Everywhere. Flexing countless legs, spreading across the page like a plague. Spider. Spider. Spider. Crawling off the page, down over the keys of her typewriter, those countless legs picking their way up her arms, making her skin crawl with them.

Spider. Spider. Spider. Spider. Spider. Spider. Spider.

Spider.

She had to achieve a transformation, make it into something else. There was an old lady who swallowed a spider – no, that wouldn't do. No, Sarah swallowed, she could almost feel the fatty lump of meat in her throat. Keep going, don't think about it. Spider spider, burning bright. You didn't half give me a fright.

The lump in her throat escaped as a laugh. Softly.

Sarah smiled. She was winning.

Yes, she could make it something ridiculous. She could do whatever she wanted with it, make of it what she will. Spider was just a word, an idea. And she played with those all the time. They were the tools of her trade.

Spider.

Yes, she could set it down on the page. As many times as she liked. Out of her head and safely contained. Paper and ink. And as the typewriter keys tapped over and over, she could see the spiders: drunken spiders, tap-dancing, doing the hokey-kokey, four right legs in, four right legs out, shaking it all about. Until she was chuckling to herself – and at herself. How stupid they looked, how foolish she had been.

And finally, yes, as she sat back and allowed herself a sigh and a heartfelt but short little sob, she glanced around the room and felt reasonably sure she had the place to herself once more. She was alone. And she was fine.

And the spiders? Returned to where they came from, where they belonged.

Crawlspace.

Like her adventures with the Doctor. Gone, but not forgotten.

∞

The Doctor was as good as his word. He took them somewhere nice.

The power failures prolonged the journey, but they got there in fits and starts. And of course by the time they arrived, the place was being invaded by sinister aliens from the neighbouring star system, who actually turned out to be the good guys who were out to liberate some of their compatriots from slavery. But by the time they were through their adventure, Sarah and – she was reasonably sure – the Doctor had managed to put Crawlspace and whatever lurked within quite out of their minds. And the wound inside the TARDIS had healed.

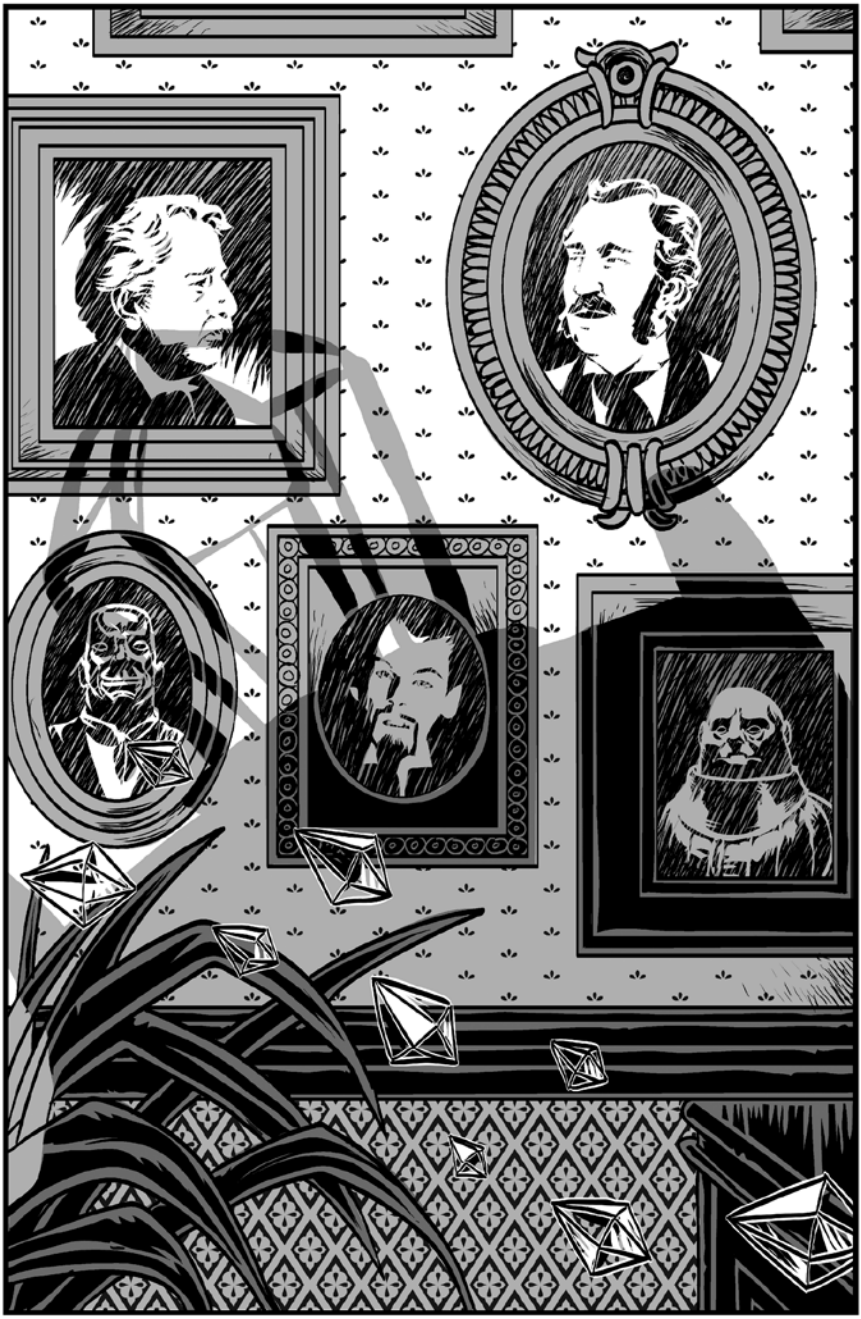
Of course, like any fear, it remained until confronted. Until that time, at least it remained tucked away. Out of mind, out of sight. But of course, that time came soon enough. All too soon.

∞

And of course, some fears, even when confronted, still linger and refuse to leave you alone.

Sarah completed her exorcism with a single word, for the moment robbed of its potency. And, for the time being at least, she had every reason to hope it would stay put. There at the bottom of the page. Like the closing of a chapter, a new one waiting.

Spider.



The League of Extraterrestrial Gentlemen

Dale Smith

This story started life as an EDA *proposal, and when I first showed it to Craig – at the height of the "use NO old monsters" diktat – he laughed his head off and asked if it was okay for him to mention to Justin Richards that he'd seen it: he wanted to be able to laugh with his old friend at the idiot who thought they could sneak a novel with no original characters in under the radar.*

When I pointed out that the idiot was me, and this was my one piece of unashamed fanwank that just wouldn't let me go until I'd written it down, he started to tell me ways I could make it better. That's how I'll remember Craig Hinton: a man who couldn't resist good gossip, and shameless fanwank.

Blackpool, **Central Pier, 1899**

It was cold and grey, and very hard to tell whether the moisture slowly soaking him to the bone was the sea-spray or a light drizzle. To Henry Gordon Jago, it was the perfect weather for finding a music hall and scouting out the local talent – in a strictly non-professional capacity of course, since his enforced retirement. And yet, here he was instead clambering around the underside of a pier looking for a troll. Litefoot had told him it would be good for his health, but, frankly, Jago thought a cigar and a nip of brandy would be much more efficacious.

'My word,' breathed Litefoot.

At least the good Professor wasn't one for ignoring his own advice.

'Well, George,' Jago breathed. 'There's your troll.'

There it was indeed. Grey skinned and squat, it was splashing around in the water under the pier. Paddling? Looking for fish? Jago couldn't guess. Instead of a head as a normal man would know it, it had a large grey dome with two slit-eyes cut in it and a sharp tongue flicking out of a small mouth. And it was looking up at them.

No, it was *charging* up at them.

'Henry,' said Litefoot nervously. 'I think perhaps –'

And then the creature had him by the throat, throttling the very life out of him. It gurgled and hissed as it attacked, flecks of spittle peppering the Professor's face. George Litefoot himself was starting to turn an alarming shade of purple.

'I say!'

'Henry!' choked Litefoot.

'Mr Troll,' Henry babbled. 'My good friend and myself our here on the express

wishes of Her Majesty the Queen and we are empowered to offer certain assistance in the recovery of your craft – goodness me – if you will use your skills in the service of –'

The creature stopped throttling Litefoot, and glared at Henry.

'What kind of assistance?' it hissed sibilantly.

Henry had to wait for his heart to settle before answering.

∞

London, Alexandra Palace, 1899

The Palace had been reopened fifteen years previously, following its death by fire and eventual reconstruction, but very few people knew about the new rooms tucked away at the rear of the building. Possibly the only people who did were the six strange souls standing there now, each of them dimly lit by the new electric lamps. Ever the showman, it was Jago who took the opportunity to be centre stage.

'My fellow adventurers,' he announced grandly. 'My companions in calamity. My attendants in adversity. Allow me to introduce our newest (and possibly our greatest) recruit, persuaded here at great personal risk to myself –'

'Please, Henry,' Litefoot sighed.

'May I present . . .'

'Scout Schtek,' the grey little troll barked, 'of the glorious Sontaran Empire. I pledge an alliance with this world and its matriarch, Viktor-ia.' At that, Schtek clicked his heels together and saluted with a thump of clenched fist to chest. There was a moment's silence.

'Yes, well,' said the Professor. 'Myself and Mr Jago you know already. This is Major Andrews...'

Andrews nodded, but didn't offer a hand: perhaps his experiences had led him to be wary of an alien handshake. Instead he straightened his already pristine uniform and nodded to the troll.

'With InTUIT,' he said briskly. 'International Telegraph Union Intelligence Taskforce. We're running this show.'

Thankfully, no-one contradicted the Major.

'This is Albert,' Litefoot swiftly carried on, motioning to the massive frame of a man apparently carved from thick, black tar. 'He's not really called Albert, you understand, but we do have to call him something. He's a refugee, like yourself.'

'I do not seek asylum,' Schtek barked coarsely. 'I need assistance to depart your world. That is all.' He looked Albert up and down. 'You are a Nestene foot soldier,' Schtek said to Albert. It sounded like an accusation. The giant, bless him, just smiled down at the

troll.

'I was left behind,' he said.

'By the Nestene,' Schtek pushed.

Albert looked to Litefoot, nervously.

'I was left behind,' Albert repeated, a little less certainly.

Jago leant in conspiratorially to where he hoped Schtek's ears must be.

'Best not push him, old chap. Not the brightest spark in the box and all that. Smashing fellow, though.'

'I see,' Schtek nodded. He tapped Albert's dark chest with a finger – of which Jago was surprised to note he only had three. 'The plastic he has inhabited is primitive.'

'It's called celluloid,' Andrews bristled.

'It is interfering with his signals. You are fortunate. He would have killed you otherwise.'

'Yes,' Litefoot murmured. 'Well.'

'And I,' said their female guest, 'am Teresa Hart, and I would appreciate it if we could begin. Gentlemen?'

Of course no-one dare argue, not even Schtek.

∞

London, Alexandra Palace, 1899

Ms Hart removed the sheet from the workbench, and revealed the corpse. Jago went a little pale, but didn't avert his eyes: Schtek on the other hand leant forwards eagerly. Jago could *hear* him smiling, a trait that the troll shared with imbeciles and children. Ms Hart motioned impatiently, and Litefoot stepped in: it took him only the briefest of examinations to confirm that the corpse was indeed dead. From the dress, he surmised that the poor unfortunate was destitute. From that, he suggested opium as the cause of death.

'Is this really something that InTUIT should be concerning itself with, Miss Hart?' Major Andrews asked, rather curtly in Jago's humble opinion. Chivalry was a dying art.

'It is,' Ms Hart confirmed. Her eyes began to glow in a most disturbing manner. 'Rise.'

The corpse sat up, to a chorus of gasps.

'Do not trouble yourselves, please,' Ms Hart said coldly. Her eyes slowly ceased their unearthly glowing: no matter how often he saw it, Jago would never feel at ease with it. 'The man is quite dead.'

'My dear Miss Hart,' Jago blustered. 'If I could pull a trick like that on the London stage...'

'It is no trick,' Ms Hart said.

Although he knew her for London born and bred, there were times when she spoke that Jago could swear she was a Johnny Foreigner. As if she could read his mind, Ms Hart's natural accent started to reassert itself.

'I have certain skills, but this wasn't my doing. This is the opium. It doesn't kill them, although it looks near enough, Professor, to fool even one as practiced as yourself. It drains their minds, leaves them a blank slate, ready to be commanded by anyone with even a little mental ability. It's like no opium the Crown has ever seen before. You understand what I am telling you?'

Jago did: he'd seen enough rum pickings in his life to know when something was up. It was the sort of thing which was so far outside the purview of the normal governmental agencies that they wouldn't be able to see it with a pair of opera glasses and a clear day.

'There is a man, named Wu, who was once a soldier of the Tong of the Black Scorpion,' Ms Hart said, her eyes clouding over. 'He supplies the opium.'

She didn't have to say: they knew they had to find him.

∞

London, Isle of Dogs, 1899

They had taken a cab down to the West India Docks, after the Major had reasonably surmised that where there were sailors, there would be opium. Litefoot and Albert had elected to begin their investigations elsewhere, and Ms Hart was required to return the mindless soul on their mortuary table to the care of her superiors. So it was that only Andrews, Jago and Schtek had stepped out into the cold December air to watch the sailors bustle this way and that making sure that London had the sugar to make its Christmas sweet. Schtek had been heavily wrapped in a travelling cloak to disguise his misshapen head, but to Jago it only made matters worse: plenty of people still remembered Joseph Merrick well enough to be on the look-out for another crowd-pleasing freak.

Now they huddled in the shadows, waiting. Watching.

'And do all your females have such developed mental powers?' Schtek was asking.

'Ah, Miss Hart,' said Jago, clapping his hands to warm himself. And perhaps because there was no audience here to do it for him. 'A sad, sad tale. She was once a victim of the dreaded Li H'sen Chang himself – the final victim, as it happens, thanks in no small part to myself I might add. But the despicable Chang's influence extended even beyond his own death: once he'd put her under his mesmeric spell, she found herself in command of all the powers he'd had. And less in command of her own self.'

'I do not know a Chang,' Schtek said.

Major Andrews hissed at them.

'There,' he said.

They looked: a greasy-haired lad of no more than twenty had made contact with a small knot of sailors who had finished their labours for the evening. All of them had the dead-eyed shakes that Jago had come to associate with opium use. His path was clear: as the sailors moved away, Henry Gordon Jago approached the lad to give the performance of his life.

'Lad,' Jago croaked, letting his hand shake a little as he touched the boy's shoulder. 'I've got a terrible ache in me bones. I need me medicine, you understand? I need to dream that special dream.'

The lad pulled a knife and held it to Jago's throat.

'Who're you? Peeler?' the lad growled. 'Didn't think they bred 'em so thick. You want me to –'

The knife suddenly disappeared from Jago's throat. He took a second to regain his composure – and let his heart sink back into a semblance of its normal rhythm. When he dared look, he saw Schtek holding the lad up by his neck, all pretence at disguise abandoned.

'You will tell me where we will find Wu,' Schtek growled.

Jago had to admit it was an effective strategy.

London, Strand, 1899

As Professor Litefoot rapped the silvered knocker, he took the opportunity to look back over his shoulder. Albert was stood demurely trying to hide himself in the shadow of the trees, grinning like a child. No matter what the troll had said, Litefoot didn't think the gentle creature could ever mean anyone any harm.

The door to the club swung open.

'What d'you want?' growled a man with tufty orange eyebrows and a skin complaint so bizarre that the professor was tempted to offer his services as a physician.

'I'd like to apply for membership,' he said instead. 'My name is Professor George Litefoot: I lecture in pathology at the Royal London Hospital.'

The doorman sniffed at Litefoot.

'Bad meat,' he said with a sneer. 'We're full.'

The door slammed shut, and Litefoot found himself forced to traipse back over to Albert. The giant figure looked at him sympathetically.

'It looks like we'll have to try some other means,' Litefoot said.

Albert nodded.

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London, Strand, 1899

A few minutes later, and Professor George Litefoot of the Royal London Hospital Pathology Department found himself in the much less distinguished position of being pushed through a small window by an alien called Albert. He landed in a small heap on the floor of what was evidently the club's billiard room, and turned back to the window to discourage Albert from trying to follow him.

'I will be fine,' Litefoot reassured gently.

Albert paused for a moment.

'I was left behind,' he said sadly. 'Our home died and we came here to... to... do something. But it didn't work, and I was left behind. I can hear their voice sometimes – the other me, the rest of me – but it's so weak, so... I was left behind. I don't like to be left behind, Professor. I like being part of something bigger. Something more than me.'

'And so you are,' Litefoot hissed through the window.

The door to the billiard room opened.

'Why, if it isn't Professor Litefoot!'

Litefoot turned from the window as quickly as he could, and did his best to present a respectable façade to his new companion. He had to admit that he couldn't place the face... and yet... there was something familiar about him. It took a few moments, possibly because he was dressed in an expensive suit and not his uniform, but eventually Litefoot had him.

'Sergeant Kyle!'

'Chief Inspector now, Professor,' Kyle preened himself. 'Thanks to this institution, I have no doubt. I didn't know you were a member. I would've seconded you, if I'd known.'

'Ah,' Litefoot said. Lying had never really been his speciality. 'I'm not exactly a member, as such. Not yet, certainly. I was... I was looking for a Mr Wu: I have some friends who assured me he was a member of this club.'

'Wu?' Kyle looked like he'd tasted something foul. 'Are you close? I mean, I don't wish to be indiscreet –'

'I assure you I've never met the gentleman.'

Kyle plumped himself up to his full width. 'Then I would suggest you keep it that way. Jumped up little coolie. He only got in because Dr Smith nominated him.'

'Dr Smith?'

Kyle looked shocked. 'You must have heard of Dr Smith!'

'I... may have,' Litefoot replied.

Kyle leant in conspiratorially. 'Then you'll have heard the stories,' Litefoot didn't think he'd seen anyone so excited by gossip since he'd explained to his housekeeper why he wouldn't use the Chinese laundry. 'Nobody I've spoken to has ever seen him, although they say he has rooms at Alexandra Palace: they say he's a Scotsman. Or a cripple. Or a millionaire who dresses as a Liverpool navvy. Or possibly all that and more: if you ask me –'

'Inspector Kyle,' growled a thick voice. 'Might I interrupt?'

Litefoot turned and saw a thickset man with tufty ginger eyebrows and a pronounced skin complaint standing in the doorway. The doorman smiled graciously, revealing sharp little teeth.

'I think Inspector Chazottes would like a word,' the doorman licked his lips. 'And I need a small word in private with Professor Litefoot here.'

'Chazottes? Of course,' Kyle flashed Litefoot a quick smile. 'I'll see you around, no doubt.' And then he was gone.

The doorman smiled, and pulled a carving knife from his jacket. 'Oh, I doubt that,' he said.

London, Shoreditch, 1899

Teresa Hart stood in front of her commander in silence.

'It progresses,' he said, softly. 'We shall have Wu presently. I only hope we shall have the time left to us that we so desperately require.'

Ms Hart said nothing.

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London, Isle of Dogs, 1899

Schtek had held the opium dealer by the neck all the way down to the warehouse. Jago could see the white marks on the youth's neck where the troll's fingers had dug in. Still, it was no less than the lad deserved. For preying on his fellow man, and spreading the evil opiate dream, of course. For that and nothing more.

'Wu's in there,' the lad had said.

Schtek had wanted to kill him. Andrews had advised against it, and instead the boy had been set loose.

There had been some discussion about how best they should progress. Schtek had favoured the direct approach. Major Andrews had favoured being more cautious and waiting for some more of his department to arrive. That had led to Schtek suggesting that he could destroy Andrews' entire government without breaking a sweat, which hadn't gone

down particularly well. In the end, Jago had suggested they go in and deal with what they found.

None of them had been expecting what they had actually found.

'You're here,' Wu had said. 'Who are you, then?' He sat in the middle of the warehouse floor. His skin was pale, and his hair and his nails had grown much longer than any true gentleman would allow. His eyes were milky and white, and only half made the effort to focus on whoever was speaking. Rats were starting to nip at his thighs, but Wu gave no indication that he could feel them.

'My name is Major Thomas Andrews.' Neither of his companions felt the need to introduce themselves.

'Are you alright?' Jago asked, pathetically.

'I believe...' Wu snorted. There was a silence. 'Who are you?' Even Schtek said nothing. 'I know you,' Wu said. 'You are here to punish me, I think. You are too late, I think. I had such big ideas. I had ever been the servant. Even as my master died, I had to drag him to the poppy palace. But that could've ended there. Mindless... Mindless... I could have... I would've been your king, Professor. But that I could keep my nose out of the...'

And then he'd died, calmly and quietly.

'So that ends that,' Schtek had said.

And then, suddenly, Wu's body had jerked. His leg had kicked out, and then his arm had followed. Major Andrews looked across at Jago for reassurance, but he wasn't the pathologist: all he could tell you happened after death was that your enemies suddenly became your greatest admirers. Despite that, he felt he could be fairly certain that the dearly departed didn't suddenly sit up and stare at you with two marble-white eyes.

'It's the opium,' Majors Andrews exclaimed. 'He must have been an addict himself.'

'Indeed,' agreed Jago. 'But our own Miss Hart is safely away from here. So who's pulling this fellow's strings?'

Jago suddenly felt his stomach turn, and he was forced to look away: Wu's skin began to develop large round blisters, which then danced around his body under the skin. It looked for all the world as if a nest of spiders had made its home under his flesh, and were now trying to find their way out. What kind of horrors had George gotten him into now?

'Fascinating!' Schtek breathed. 'Observe.'

Against his better judgement, Jago turned back.

Wu's eyes burst open, and disgorged a stream of clear crystals.

'Thank you, my good troll,' Jago said faintly. 'I shouldn't have wanted to miss that.'

The lumps on Wu's body were all streaming to his face now, having found their exit. The face was so distorted by the hideous motion that Jago would've sworn not even the chinaman's own mother would have recognised him. Jago was going to be ill, he knew.

'What are they?' Andrews asked. 'Diamonds?'

'They have independent motion,' Schtek noted. 'and they combine. Observe.'

The troll was right: all of the smaller crystals pouring from the chinaman's body were starting to group together once outside of his body. With a pale flash, they merged together into larger crystals which then began to merge with others which then...

'I'm afraid I need a breath of fresh air,' Jago mumbled, and headed for the door.

'Don't let them escape!' Andrews called.

Jago didn't answer; he just headed to the door with his stomach making some rather disturbing sounds. He feared he might be having a relapse of his previous problem, not quite cured by a stay with his sister. Once in the fresh air, he could do little more than stand bent double retching onto the dirt. He was a delicate man, he told himself, and with his years and background there was no shame in leaving the corpses to the professionals. Particularly when their skin danced so.

He looked up. 'My word!' he exclaimed shakily. 'Major Andrews!'

'A little preoccupied, Mr Jago,' came the answer.

'Major, I assure you, you will wish to see this.'

The Major appeared beside him in the door, and looked. His mouth fell open. The docks were awash with crystals the size of a man's fist, all rushing this way and that: the poor sailors, tarts and workers were running this way and that trying to avoid them, or else trying to beat the tide back with a broom or a docker's knife. As they watched, the crystals bumped and merged just as they had seen inside the warehouse, this time forming a most unusual shape.

Schtek ran from the warehouse behind them, chasing his own crystal, but soon stopped himself when he saw the others. Before their eyes, the crystals formed a large blocky form with rudimentary claws extended before it. Parts of it appeared to be made of metal, but Jago had seen only crystal go into its manufacture. Its head was a giant clear crystal, light reflecting in its pristine facets.

'What is it?' Andrews breathed.

'A warrior,' Schtek said with no little admiration. 'A challenge.'

The creature paused, and seem to look at them.

'It is a Kroton,' Schtek said.

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London, Strand, 1899

Litefoot backed away from his assailant, looking for a weapon. The billiard cues were at the opposite end of the room in their rack, and besides which he wasn't a common ruffian. It was Marquis of Queensbury, a good elephant gun, or nothing, with him. The doorman with the extraordinary eyebrows seemed to prefer knives, since that was what he brandished as he stepped ever closer. The doorman licked his lips.

'I'm glad you broke in: I get to do what I want with trespassers,' he said. 'I think maybe a fricassee.'

'Now, sir,' stammered Litefoot.

The doorman grinned.

To be honest, it was hard to judge which of the two of them was the most surprised when one of the billiard balls lifted itself from the table and flew across the room to connect with the doorman's head. He turned, perhaps expecting to see some accomplice, but instead he saw two cue balls flying themselves into his cheekbones. He dropped his knives and started flailing his arms around for protection, but to little avail. There were three tables in the room each with three balls apiece, which – once they had struck – simply picked themselves up and struck again.

'Professor,' called Albert.

Litefoot looked to the window he had entered by and saw two black tentacles snaking wildly about. He hurried over and let them grasp at him, fighting his natural discomfort. Within seconds, he found himself lifted out of the billiard room and placed gently on the floor in front of his comrade. Through the window, he heard the sound of two billiard balls clacking together, and then there was a loud crash and a flash of light. Smoke soon started pouring from the window.

'Well,' Litefoot said, dusting himself down. 'I suppose we should be thankful the club's proprietor ignored the safety warnings. If he'd had ivory balls like any true gentleman...'

'You are safe?' Albert asked.

'I am safe,' Litefoot confirmed. 'Thank you, Albert.' The ebony creature smiled, like a child. 'And I have information which may prove to be important. This way, please Albert.'

'Where are we going?'

'Home,' Litefoot said.

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London, Isle of Dogs, 1899

The crystal monster, Schtek's Kroton, stood silently in the docks, the winter sunshine glinting off its newly constructed body. It was midday, but the docks had cleared regardless. Only the great ships remained, everybody else having run from the strangeness of the day. Except for Schtek, who panted in anticipation as he checked and rechecked a tubular device hanging from his belt.

'Is it dangerous?' Jago asked.

Schtek simply smiled as broadly as his thin mouth would allow.

'Can you defeat it?' Andrews asked.

'Unlikely,' Schtek admitted, still grinning. 'But I shall try, for the honour of the Sontaran Empire. What more could any warrior ask, but to die in glorious battle?'

'If I make it home today,' Andrews replied grimly, 'I'll take my son in my arms and tell him it's a fool's game being a warrior: he can find some more sedate occupation, like pleasure cruising.'

'Major Andrews,' Jago whispered. 'I think it's moving.'

And indeed it was: it spun around on its heavy tracks and started to trundle at a remarkable speed back the way that Jago and his companions had walked down early that day. Into the heart of London. The Major's face went pale as he watched it. He checked his pistol.

'We won't be able to stop it without proper armaments,' he said.

'You won't be able to stop it at all,' Schtek hissed.

'All the same, I must try,' Andrews said. 'For the British Empire.'

Jago felt his heart flutter: really, he wasn't meant for this kind of adventure. He was an old and weak man. The creature was almost away from the docks now: Jago felt a great temptation simply to watch it go, and then make his exit in the opposite direction.

'Jago,' Andrews said. 'You and Schtek follow that thing and try to slow it down. I'll go for reinforcements.' And then he was gone.

God help an old showman.

∞

London, Alexandra Palace, 1899

Professor Litefoot slipped as quietly as he could manage through the corridors hidden in the depths of Alexandra Palace. The obsidian bulk of Albert pressed close to his shoulder in what Litefoot presumed the creature thought was a protective manner. The evening was wearing on, and the rooms were darkened. If George was completely honest with himself, he'd have to admit that it wasn't excitement that was making his heart pound

so. He listened as hard as he could for some clue of others in the building. The Palace was as silent as the grave.

How he wished he hadn't thought that.

'Professor,' Ms Hart said icily. 'Have you come to report?'

Litefoot let out a breath, and drew himself upright.

'Miss Hart,' he said, turning to greet her. She stood in a darkened doorway, dressed elegantly, as if for a night at the theatre. She raised an eyebrow as she readjusted her white lace gloves. 'I suppose that I have, in one way. I must confess I was hoping to avoid you, however. I'm looking for a Doctor Smith. He is with you, I presume?'

Ms Hart didn't answer, concentrating on her gloved hands.

'I am right in thinking that your claims to be working on behalf of Her Majesty weren't entirely true?'

'I never said I worked for her,' Hart said, flashing green eyes at the Professor. 'I simply said "the highest power in England", and there is none higher. It was Mr Jago who started spouting off about Victoria.'

Litefoot shook his head.

'Silly old fool,' he said. 'All this time, and we've been doing exactly what you wanted of us. Finding this drug. Not, I presume, to destroy it? No, I suppose that would be too much to hope. You wish to market it, no doubt. The docks will be awash with mindless slaves before the week is out. Have you no soul, madam?'

Hart smirked at that.

'You still imagine this is about drugs, Professor?'

Litefoot looked up at Albert. The creature didn't move, perhaps waiting to take its cue from the pathologist. Between the two of them, they should easily be able to overpower Ms Hart, even with her mesmeric powers. Always assuming that Albert was still with him, and hadn't been on Hart's side since the very beginning, that was. The creature's innocent ebon face gave nothing away.

'Perhaps you would tell me what it is about?'

Hart paused. 'Some months back,' she said cautiously, 'a meteorite struck in Ashbridge. A crystal meteorite, shattered to powder by the speed it hit us with. InTUIT tried to take possession, and then the Crown were interested: my principal managed to claim the remains, convincing both sides that the other had got it.'

'Doctor Smith,' Litefoot said.

Hart nodded. 'He discovered what he'd already suspected,' she said. Her face had such an unpleasant coldness to it, Litefoot shivered to think he'd once felt pity for her. 'Under the right mental influence, the crystals could reform in any combination. *Any* combination, even down to the smallest level. Gold, oil, diamonds. Opium. Before we

could perfect the process, that disreputable Wu stole everything he could take.' Litefoot felt Albert shift behind him. 'The fool,' Hart spat. 'No greater ambition than replacing the tongs and feeding his own greed, when we...'

'Miss Hart,' Litefoot said firmly. 'This cannot go on any longer.'

Hart looked at him strangely, and then stepped to one side. Litefoot looked questioningly, but she simply waved him through the doorway into the darkened room beyond. There was a strange smell coming from the room, which eventually he managed to identify: poppy smoke. Litefoot drew himself up and stepped into the room, Albert following silently behind him.

'My dear Professor,' came a rich voice from inside. 'How long has it been?'

For a moment, Litefoot couldn't place it.

'My dear Professor,' echoed Ms Hart. 'How long has it been?'

Litefoot turned back to her, only to see the poor woman suddenly collapse into a faint, her head hitting the floor with a sickening thud. He rushed to her, and was surprised to find that her skin was chilly to the touch. He felt for a pulse, but couldn't find one. She was already dead, her life turned off as easily as a gas lamp. Albert knelt and touched her skin with his tar-black hand.

Litefoot looked back into the room, and saw a figure in a bath-chair wheeling itself towards him. 'Forgive me, Professor,' the figure said. 'I'm afraid Ms Hart was only ever a puppet of this unworthy.' The bath-chair moved out of the shadows, and Litefoot gasped.

'Li H'sen Chang!' he cried.

London, Hackney, 1899

Jago ran as fast as he could manage, but Schtek was still far ahead of him, chasing after the Kroton and occasionally firing on it with that stubby little tube he kept on his belt. So far, the troll hadn't managed to hit the crystal creature, and so far it had ignored them both. Instead it just kept powering onwards, parting the crowds before it and sending man, woman and child screaming for the brandy.

What Jago wouldn't give for a quiet club and a cigar now.

Jago paused by a wall to catch his breath, and saw a gentleman dressed all in black watching him with a most disquieting look on his face. There was something about the man that looked familiar, although Jago would've sworn he hadn't set eyes on the man before. Such an expression of malice would certainly have made an impression.

'Not to worry,' Jago panted at him. 'All under control.'

The gentleman didn't look like he believed him.

'Quickly, human!' Schtek barked at him. 'I have acquired transport.'

Jago looked up: the troll was hanging off the back of a hansom cab, with the cabbie holding the reins and looking most bemused. Jago took a deep breath and climbed up into the carriage, trying to give the driver a reassuring look.

'Don't worry,' he managed. 'I'm in the theatre.'

The cab drove off.

The gentleman in black watched it go.

'I would've thought this would have brought him out,' he said to himself. 'Apparently not. San Francisco, then.'

And then he vanished inside a strange blue box.

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London, Alexandra Palace, 1899

'Forgive me, Professor,' Chang said, inviting Litefoot and Albert into his room. 'Both for my actions, and my continued survival. Believe me, I am just as distressed as you. It seems that one of the many indignities the false god Weng Chiang has subjected me to is to grant me immortality. It is most... unwelcome.'

'This is extraordinary,' was all Litefoot could manage.

'You are most kind,' Chang said, with a slight neck bow. 'But excuse me if I do not find it so. He has left me all my capacity to feel pain, and only one crippled leg. I fear I have been forced to barter the pain for an eternity of addiction. Still, all this too shall soon be corrected.'

'I don't follow.'

Chang raised an eyebrow. 'Is it so? Forgive me, Professor. I am remiss in my explanations. I had expected you to understand without them. No matter,' Chang took a draw on the opium pipe in his hand, and seemed to relax. 'My master, the false god, had a cabinet of wonders, Professor. You held it for him, for a while. A cabinet that could take him anywhere in time. I would use it to take myself back to the moment I met him, and destroy rather than aid him. All that stands in my way is a unique key... you understand my interest in the crystals now, yes?'

Litefoot's mouth hung agape. 'I was there when Chiang tried to escape using that cabinet, sir,' he said. 'I was told that if he had succeeded, he would have destroyed London in his wake.'

'Indeed, and so shall I,' Chang said softly. 'But once I have changed history, that too will change.' Litefoot looked at Chang then, and realised that the Chinaman was quite, quite mad. 'Alas the despicable Wu did not leave me enough of the crystal to recreate the

key, and I had to involve you in my plan. I cannot apologise humbly enough, Professor.'

'Professor...' Albert said. He was looking out of a curtained window.

∞

London, Alexandra Palace, 1899

The Kroton thundered down the roads, leaving those that didn't flee it quick enough dead in its wake. Either it fired on them using its bulbous weapon, or else it simply crushed them beneath its massive bulk. There was no doubt now that it was heading for their erstwhile headquarters at Alexandra Palace. Perhaps the strange creature was a deliberate attack on them, set loose in response to their own mobilisation to investigate its genesis.

'You will jump,' Schtek shouted at the cabbie.

The poor lad gave the troll a disbelieving expression. He looked to Jago for moral support, but the old showman was too busy trying to keep hold of his lunch as the hansom cab hurtled after the Kroton, its horses sweating and the carriage threatening to overturn and each corner. 'You will jump,' Schtek growled.

The cabbie obeyed.

'What now?' Jago asked.

'Now,' Schtek announced with a glimmer in his eye, 'we ram!'

Jago looked at the grey-skinned troll, but didn't see a hint of humour in his face. His stomach gave a very nervous growl, and Jago joined it with a whimper. 'Now are you certain –'

Schtek swung the carriage around another corner. The horses were charging straight for the Kroton at a breakneck pace, their lips flecked with white spittle. He wondered if they even had the sense left to save themselves. Certainly Schtek didn't seem to have. Fortunately, that was just the one kind of sense that Henry Gordon Jago had never been in short supply of. He closed his eyes and clambered to the back of the carriage before whispering a quick prayer and looking down to the cobblestones racing by underneath him.

If only Casey could see him now.

He dropped.

'Die!' screamed Schtek, and the hansom carriage slammed into the crystal bulk of the Kroton.

∞

London, Alexandra Palace, 1899

Dust filled the air of the street.

Jago pulled himself painfully to hit feet and stood waiting for it to clear so he could see what damage the crash had caused. He could see the horses bolting into the distance – at the last minute they had ignored Schtek's urgings and changed direction to save their own skin: the carriage itself, however, couldn't escape the momentum and had slammed straight into the crystal beast, shattering itself to matchsticks.

The dust cleared.

The Kroton was standing, unharmed, holding Schtek in the air with a single claw. The crystal head seemed somehow to scrutinise him. The grey troll's head was bleeding, a dusty, dirty green-black blood. Jago wondered just what it would take to scratch that crystal armour. Schtek was laughing asthmatically, and struck the Kroton with a three-fingered fist.

'Wait!' Jago shouted. The Kroton turned to observe him. 'I mean...' Jago backed away.

'Fire!' yelled Major Andrews's voice from somewhere behind Jago.

There was a loud crump, and then the air filled with whistling before the Kroton and Schtek disappeared into dust again. There was another crump, then another, and Jago felt himself thrown to the floor. Suddenly there were red uniforms all around him and the crackle of gunfire. He had never in his career played Hamlet, nor for that matter played much of anything on the legitimate stage. He could see Major Andrews guiding his men's fire through the smoke.

There was a crackle of electricity, and two of Andrews' men flew through the air. The smoke cleared again, and the Kroton was there. It had a massive crack down one side, but otherwise it seemed unharmed. There was no sign of Schtek – was there any hope that the troll could have survived the initial assault? Jago was suddenly very certain that he was going to die, without having the opportunity to thank his friend George for the last few years of happiness.

'Again!' Andrews yelled, and the cannon fire filled the streets once more.

The Kroton disappeared again into the smoke. This time when it reappeared, it was rolling with renewed vigour towards the gates of Alexandra Palace. Jago saw the look of panic on the Major's face – if the creature made it inside, then they wouldn't be able to attack it without bringing the building down around its ears. If it even had any. Andrews frantically ordered a fresh volley of cannon-fire, but to no avail: the creature disappeared inside.

'Private,' Andrews yelled. 'Run and get us authorisation to destroy Alexandra Palace.'

'What, again, sir?' the private asked disbelievingly.

'Now!'

Jago wondered if they'd notice if he went home.

∞

London, Alexandra Palace, 1899

Litefoot had just decided that he had no choice but to tackle Chang when the wall at the far side of the room burst inwards. There was a rain of rubble and dust, and when it cleared both Litefoot and Chang looked on with open mouthed amazement. Standing in the ruins was a giant crystal-headed creature, seeming to look this way and that despite a distinct lack of facial features. It was roughly the same size as Albert, and probably just as strong with it.

'Good heavens,' Litefoot exclaimed. 'What is that beast?'

'I... am uncertain,' Chang admitted.

The creature turned to him, its arms outstretched. The Chinaman gave a cry, and his hand went to his breast pocket: at first, Litefoot suspected he was having some kind of coronary attack, until he pulled out a crystal which was the smaller twin to the creature's head and eyed it suspiciously. The crystal was pulsing with a strange alien light.

'It would seem we have an answer to the mystery of our powder,' Chang said. 'Most... remarkable.'

RETURN MYSELF TO ME, the creature barked metallically.

Chang looked up to Albert.

'My apologies, Mr Albert,' he said, and his eyes glowed.

As did Albert's.

Suddenly the obsidian giant launched himself at the crystal creature, striking it with fist as hard as sledgehammers – the creature visible rocked back, waving its arms, before it began to defend itself. A bulbous protrusion on the end of one of its arms started spitting some kind of corrosive smoke at Albert, and whereever it touched him the tar-black plastic of his skin began to bubble and blister. Albert did not seem to feel the pain, although Litefoot could see Chang's face contorting with each strike.

Litefoot had no idea what to do – he couldn't join Albert's fight, that much was certain: the two giants were tearing the very room down around their own ears in the efforts to destroy each other. Albert's limbs flowed and changed as he tried to gain some kind of advantage over the crystal monster, but his opponent seemed to have brute strength and weaponry on his side. Litefoot thought that his only hope to save Albert was to fight Chang, but the Chinaman had the same idea:

'Forgive me, Professor,' he said humbly.

A plastic limb snaked from Albert's back and knocked Litefoot to the floor, before trapping him beneath a giant five fingered hand.

DESIST! The crystal monster urged.

Albert paused for a moment, watching as his own skin bubbled under the strange effects of the creature's smoke. Then his entire body seemed to turn to liquid, flowing around the monster until it was completely encased. Albert seemed to inflate, and then just as suddenly his entire body collapsed with a devastating *CRAK*! His body opened, and the crystal creature was no longer inside. Instead, a fine white sand cascaded out onto the floor.

'At last,' Chang cried.

Albert looked to Litefoot, still trapped inside his plastic cage: there seemed to be a look of almost apology on his face. Then he bent to scoop some of the sand into his hand. By the time he reached out to pass it to Chang, the Chinaman's mind had already transformed the dust into a small round artefact the size of a cake of soap.

'Chang, please,' Litefoot urged. 'You'll kill us all.'

'No, Professor,' Chang shook his head. 'I will save us.'

Change wheeled himself over to an ornate lacquered cabinet standing ominously in the corner. Litefoot recognised it, of course: it had been his family who had brought it into the country, thinking it to be a simple Chinese puzzle-box. But it wasn't so innocent a furnishing; it was the time cabinet of Weng-Chiang and no amount of subtlety or intelligence would open it without the unique crystal key that fit its lock. Or, perhaps, a perfect facsimile of the destroyed key.

Chang pressed the crystal against the lock.

The crystal glowed, and the cabinet slowly unlocked itself.

The front panel slid slowly to one side, revealing a small alcove filled with flashing lights, wires and a single chair. Wherever Weng-Chiang had hoped to travel in his time machine, he clearly hadn't been intending on taking any passengers. At least, not human ones. Litefoot shouted and tore at the plastic bars of his cage, but to no avail. Albert sat beside him, all the life apparently drained from him.

'Chang, I beg you...' Litefoot said.

Chang pressed a button, and the machine began to power up.

'It will all be better,' he said. 'I promise you, Professor.'

Chang turned back to the innards of the machine, and then was distracted by a sound. The machine began to whine in a most distressing manner, and imbedded deep in the controls was something that shouldn't have been there. A small black star of metal had sank its sharp teeth into the control panel. It hadn't been there before: Chang's brows

knit together in confusion. Blood was starting to drip onto the flight seat. This was most strange.

His hand went to his chest, and found it wet.

'George! Are you alright?' shouted a voice.

Chang turned as quickly as his chair would allow, and saw two figures in the doorway: one was the theatre manager, Henry Gordon Jago. That was good – Chang had always wanted to apologise to him for leaving him without a star turn all those years ago. But Jago wasn't alone: he was holding up a squat figure with a bulbous head, thick blackish blood seeping from a thousand cuts all over its body. The grey troll had hatred in its piggy eyes, and another metal throwing star in its hand.

'You have killed me,' Schtek announced. 'I have killed you.'

'You have killed us all,' said Chang sadly, then died.

∞

London, Alexandra Palace, 1899

Weng-Chiang's time cabinet began to belch out a thin white smoke, and filled the air with a high pitched whine that Schtek in particular seemed to find intolerable. The troll leant against the wall as Jago hurried to try and release Litefoot, but to no avail.

'Turn that noise off!' Schtek growled.

'I can't,' Litefoot cried. 'I don't believe anyone can, now. The machine is building power at full stretch. Soon it will snap, like an elastic band, and half of London will be destroyed in the explosion.'

Schtek licked his lips.

There was a dull thud as Jago slapped Albert hard across the face. The celluloid giant's head didn't move, but the theatre manager began to dance up and down holding his injured hand.

'Albert, please,' Litefoot said softly.

Albert shook his head slowly, and suddenly Litefoot's prison was gone. 'I'm sorry, Professor,' he apologised.

'Remove the Nestene and yourselves from the vicinity,' Schtek barked.

Jago and Litefoot looked at each other. 'We'll never get away in time,' the Professor said.

'Now!' Schtek hissed. They didn't argue. Jago forgot his injured hand and rushed over to help his friend the Professor to his feet. Together, the two of them were scooped up into the arms of Albert, who raced them both to the door. For a moment, the lumbering plastic monster paused and looked back. Schtek had pulled himself to his feet and was

watching them unsteadily.

'Goodbye, grey-man,' Albert said, then was gone.

Schtek tried to pull himself into some state befitting a Sontaran, but he was in a bad way. He had lost a lot of blood and was still bleeding, and the battle against the Kroton had left him with many broken bones. If he had his ship, he could survive. But without its life-giving energies... Schtek shuffled painfully over to the time cabinet. Without his ship's life-giving energies, he thought, he would just have to improvise.

He licked his lips.

∞

London, Hammersmith and Fulham, 1900

The tent was remarkably warm, given the inclement weather and the lateness of the hour. But then perhaps, Professor Litefoot considered, they were being protected from the worst ravages of the weather by the alcohol in their veins. Henry Gordon Jago had quickly set upon a pair of bottles of a particularly fine Rioja, and even Major Andrews had allowed himself a few pints of Best Bitter. They were, after the trials of their recent endeavours, relaxing – and there was nothing wrong with that. They deserved the opportunity to see in the new century however they saw fit.

They were all there: Albert, Jago, the Major. Schtek was sitting next to the Professor drinking from a bottle of brandy and watching everyone through slitted eyes, looking non-the-worse for his near-death experience. Only poor Ms Hart wasn't with them ... but then, Litefoot supposed, she had never really been with them at all. Right from the moment she stepped into Weng-Chiang's lair, she had surrendered her mind to the control of Chang.

'When shall we begin finding my ship?' Schtek asked.

'Soon, my friend,' Litefoot assured him. 'After your quick thinking saved London, I'm sure Her Majesty will put her finest men on it.'

Schtek swigged at his bottle. 'I did not do it to save your city,' Schtek grumbled. 'I did it to save no-one but myself. If it would kill one lousy Rutan, I would gladly destroyed a thousand of your Londons.' Litefoot smiled politely.

'Gentlemen,' Major Andrews shouted. All turned to look at him. 'You have saved your country, and earned the gratitude of its government and its Queen. And now it is time to tell you how that gratitude has manifested itself.'

'Oodles of doubloons, I should hope,' called Jago, with a laugh.

Andrews smiled. 'Better,' he insisted. 'You shall all be given permanent employment for as long as you are able, seconded to InTUIT to protect the world from

the strange and unusual threats you have proved yourself so adept at handling. My friends, I congratulate you. Cheers!'

Jago blew a loud raspberry. Even Andrews had to smile. 'And on that note: don't drink too much tonight. In the morning, you will be transported to the site of the Marble Arch underground station. Construction has halted because the workers have uncovered a most strange thing: some kind of mechanical creature, as I understand it.'

There was a moment's silence.

'Well, Mr Jago,' said Professor Litefoot, holding aloft his glass. 'It appears that there is indeed no rest for the wicked.'

'None whatsoever, Professor,' Jago agreed good-naturedly. 'None whatsoever.'

And so they saw out the century, together.

Indigenous Species

Stephen Hatcher

I was never lucky enough to meet Craig Hinton. I only ever had one exchange of emails with him, on the occasion of another ridiculously premature death, that of our mutual friend Adam Richards, which I had the duty to announce to the online community via the various message boards of which Adam was an habituee. Craig was one of the first people to get in touch, and subsequently contacted Adam's partner Robbie Langton.

What happened next is described elsewhere in this book by Robbie. So it is as a fan that I write. I have long loved Craig's writing for its sheer cheek and nerve as well as for its sheer quality. As am aspiring writer with an over-developed continuity instinct myself, Craig's is the standard to which I aspire. My story doesn't feature a Doctor/companion team that is particularly Craigish, but nonetheless it is respectfully dedicated to his memory, with thanks.

The sound that awoke Roberto was like no other that he had heard on this planet before. He could have sworn that it was an animal, yet that was impossible. He opened his eyes and blinked to get used to the darkness. 'Did you hear that?' Nella didn't answer; he could still feel the warmth left by her body, but she was gone. 'Nella?' Quietly he got out of the camp bed and opened the entrance to the tent. Emerging into the warm night, he could see very little other than the shadows of trees and the great swirl of stars in the sky. The only sound was that of a small stream. Then he realised. What he heard was more than just the running of the water. Someone or something was drinking. He called her name again, and listened for the reply that didn't come.

It was over in a second. A huge clawed fist clubbed him to the ground, an overwhelming musky smell assailed his nostrils and the creature's bulk was upon him. As the huge teeth ripped out his windpipe, his last thought was simply that this cannot be happening.

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They had landed in a cemetery. That suited him just fine. It appealed to the sense of the morbid that was becoming an increasingly predominant character trait. In the weeks since they had said their goodbyes to Romana, leaving her trapped on the other side of the CVE, he had come to dwell more and more upon his own mortality. He wasn't as young as he

had once been – nor yet as young as he would be. True, by the standards of the Time Lords of Gallifrey, this, his fourth body, was far from chronologically old, indeed he had inhabited his first incarnation for far longer, remaining fit and active for most of that time. However this time it was different; the Doctor was feeling tired.

The boy didn't help. Travelling alone with him was proving a chore. The Doctor had always believed that keeping the company of young people made one feel younger oneself. The Doctor gave a grumpy snort of derision at the thought. With his precocious attitude and his irrational desire to do anything to prove himself to the Doctor, coupled with an inability to listen to what he was being told and an unshakable belief in the correctness of his own opinions - however misguided they may be – Adric was too much like hard work for the Doctor in this mood.

It went beyond the boy though. The Doctor was suffering from an indefinable deep-seated malaise. There was something in the air. Something was wrong, something was coming, and it was all bad. Perhaps a regeneration was on the way. There was a time when such a prospect would have excited and invigorated him, but now it just increased his gloom.

The Doctor took another look at the scanner. It was definitely a cemetery. It suited his mood. He smiled grimly to himself. On the TARDIS control panel a purple light was flashing. 'Hello,' he said to himself. 'What have we here?'

At that moment, Adric came into the console room, noticing the flashing light immediately. 'There's a light flashing.'

'I know.'

'What does it mean?'

'What does it mean? Well, it means that there are abnormally high levels of Dysonian radiation, that's what it means.'

'Dysonian radiation? Isn't that something to do with terraforming?'

'Yes, it strongly suggests that this planet has been terraformed. But Dysonian radiation doesn't usually hang around long after the process has finished. No, it's odd. It's very odd in fact. Still, it won't do us any harm.' He flipped a switch to turn off the scanner and another to open the door, jamming his maroon floppy hat over his voluminous curls and throwing his unfeasibly long matching scarf around his neck as he did so. 'Come on, Adric, let's see where we are.' With the boy in tow, the Doctor strode out of the TARDIS.

The moment they left the controlled climate of the space and time machine, a wall of dry heat hit them. The Doctor immediately regretted the scarf and overcoat and, removing both, tossed them back through the open door of the TARDIS, before joining Adric in taking in the scene. The cemetery in which they had landed nestled against the

foot of a steep hill, which was crowned by the low stone buildings and terraced gardens of a small town and surrounded by fields and olive groves. In the distance a young man was tending a flock of sheep.

'This is it, Adric. This is where it all ends - a graveyard.' The boy didn't reply other than by glancing thoughtfully at the Doctor. He began wandering among the gravestones. 'Just think,' the Doctor went on, 'each one of these stones represents a life. A baby thrust unwillingly into the universe, who through painful trial and error grows into maturity – the lucky ones at least. Each one of them a jumble of loves and hates, desires and ambitions, fears and insecurities. And all of it comes to nothing. All of them, those who did good and those who did not, all of them end up here.'

'Well, at least this is a pleasant spot, here under the trees.' The Doctor snorted to himself in quiet annoyance that his melancholy had been challenged. 'There seem to be a lot of young people buried here.'

'What?' The Doctor's interest was piqued. He began reading off the details on some of the stones. Most carried a simple inscription, just a name, age and dates: 'Scarponi, Francesca – 19 years; Gambino, Simone – 21 years; Corbellari, Andrea – 17 years.' Yes, there were those that had died at an older age, as might have been expected, but the more the Doctor looked, the more it became apparent that the graveyard contained more than its fair share of younger occupants, and from the dates most of them had taken up residence here during the last two years. The Doctor's frown deepened. 'I don't like this, Adric. I don't like it at all. Come on.' Followed by the boy, he strode purposefully away and quickly found a path, which led towards the town on the top of the hill. Accompanied by the chirruping of insects and the distant bleating of sheep, they began to climb.

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It took longer to reach the top than Adric had expected. When they got there, the town they found was surprisingly attractive, made up of stone buildings in narrow streets, clustered around a picturesque central square dominated by a large building decorated with flower-filled window boxes. Adric took this to be some sort of town hall or administrative building. It was a pleasant scene, made more so by the gentle sound of running water, which came from a large fountain in the middle of the square. Opposite the town hall a café gave shelter from the heat of the sun to a number of locals, most of whom sat outside around small tables under large umbrellas that carried slogans proclaiming the virtues of various local wines.

The heat and the climb had taken their toll and the boy had been happy to accept the Doctor's suggestion that they repair to the café for refreshments. The Doctor ordered

drinks for them both, disappointed to discover that ginger beer was unknown on this planet. As they waited for the waiter to return, the Doctor picked up a discarded newspaper from a chair and began to scrutinise it.

'Nuovaperugia.'

'I'm sorry?'

'Nuovaperugia, that's where we are. An Earth colony planet founded during the Second Great Migration – not so long ago, judging by the date on this newspaper, certainly no more than fifty years ago. It's a terraformed planetoid. The settlers decided that they wanted to be in this region of space, but they couldn't find an uninhabited planet that could support them, just a barren ball of rock. So, they took it and transformed it into something of a paradise. All you see Adric, all this greenery, all this life; none of it was here a little over half a century ago. They are quite amazing these humans, you know – especially at this point in their history. I really must take you to see Earth sometime.' The Doctor smiled to himself, his earlier melancholy seemingly somewhat lifted by the pleasant surroundings and thoughts of the achievements of one of his favourite species. 'Now, those graves. Let's see what we can find out.'

At that moment their waiter returned carrying a tray of drinks.

The Doctor coughed theatrically. 'I wonder if you could help us?'

The man looked up from where he had been setting down the Doctor's iced water and Adric's spremuta di limone.

'Sí, signore.' He gave the Doctor a friendly smile.

'We couldn't help noticing the cemetery at the foot of the hill. There seems to be an awfully large amount of young people in it, and we...'

The smile froze. 'Scusi, signore; non capisco. Non posso aiutare.' The waiter looked down, refusing to meet the Doctor's penetrating gaze, and hurried away.

'Well, that's very odd. All of a sudden he seemed not to be able to understand me. I wonder why that is. Yes, very odd. Very odd indeed,' the Doctor pondered. Adric said nothing, sipping on his drink.

'They won't talk about it, you know.' The voice came from a short balding, olive-skinned man who was sitting at the next table. He had clearly overheard the exchange with the waiter.

'What did you say?'

'The dead children, they won't talk about it. None of them.'

'Ah, but you will?'

'My name is Carlo Minnoli. Since I arrived on Nuovaperugia, you are the first people who have acknowledged that something is going on… the children… my daughter…' The man faltered, seemingly about to become distressed.

'Ah well, Carlo, we're very pleased to meet you. This is Adric and I'm the Doctor. We've only just arrived here ourselves.'

'Are you here to investigate what's been happening?'

'Hmm, yes, well… In a manner of speaking, I suppose we are, eh, Adric? Why don't you come over here and tell us what you know.'

The man seemed relieved to be able to tell his story. Without hesitation, he picked up his drink and accepted the Doctor's invitation. 'I came here to look for my daughter Nella, and her fiancé Roberto. She's a xenobiologist, he's an engineer. They've been working here for just over a year. For the first six months everything seemed to be going well, they had settled down, made some friends, they were enjoying the work. They loved this place. After all, who wouldn't love it here? It's a paradise. Then suddenly the calls stopped. No warnings, no sign that anything was less than perfect, they just stopped calling. Of course, we – my wife and I – tried to get in touch with them, but it was impossible. We tried to speak to their friends, they had mentioned some names, but many of them seemed to be unattainable too. The few that we did speak to either claimed to know nothing, or denied that they had even known Nella and Roberto. Then, two weeks ago, we received this.'

The Doctor read the printed message that Carlo handed him:

'Regret to inform you Nella Minnoli, Roberto Calandretti confirmed dead. Giuseppe Pertini, Chief Administrator, Nuovaperugia.'

The Doctor looked up solemnly. 'Hardly very informative, is it? So you decided to come and see what you could find out for yourself…'

'And it hasn't been easy. If it hadn't been for a friend in the Colonial Immigrations Bureau, I suspect that I wouldn't have even been allowed to come here. I've not been able to find any of Nella and Roberto's friends; apparently they are all "away on survey expeditions and cannot be reached". Like you, I noticed all those young people buried in the cemetery, but no one will talk about it. You saw how the waiter was when you asked him.'

'Yes, yes.' The Doctor pushed his hat further back on his head. 'Something's not right. How about this Pertini, the administrator? Have you managed to see him?'

'Ah, well there I do seem to be making some progress. It has taken constant pestering on my part, but he has granted me an appointment. I'm due to go and see him…' Carlo glanced up to check the time on the town hall clock, 'in about twenty minutes.'

'Splendid. Well, if you don't mind, Carlo, I would very much like to come along to see Signor Pertini with you. I suspect he may very well know more than he is letting on.' The Doctor jumped to his feet, tossing a few coins on the table. Adric made to rise. 'No, Adric, you stay here and see if you can find anything out. The older colonists won't talk to us. It's just possible that some of the younger ones might talk to you. We'll see you back here in an hour.'

'Okay, Doctor, see you later.' The boy sat down again and returned to his drink, enjoying the warmth of the sun and looking around for anyone of his own age, with whom he might strike up a conversation.

He did not notice, in the doorway of the café, the waiter watching the scene, then retreating behind the bar to pick up the telephone.

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The Doctor and Carlo were shown into a plush office in the main administration building. Carlo took in the administrator, a small, elderly, grey-haired man with heavy spectacles, sitting behind a large desk. He put down the telephone, got to his feet and came forward to greet them. 'Signor Minnoli, I am very glad to meet you. I'm Giuseppe Pertini. And you are…?' He turned to the Doctor with an enquiring look.

'I'm the Doctor. I'm a friend of Signor Minnoli.'

'Do sit down, both of you. This is a very sad business. Allow me to express my sorrow at your loss, although I'm not entirely sure why you have come here. Is there something that I can do for you?'

Still standing, Carlo met the administrator's gaze defiantly. 'I have come to find my daughter.'

'But Signor Minnoli, did you not get my message? Your daughter is dead. I'm afraid your journey here has been wasted.'

'You say she is dead, but then where is her grave? Where is my daughter's body?'

The Doctor watched silently as Pertini returned to the chair behind the desk. The old man paused and sighed. 'Signor Minnoli, how much do you know about the circumstances of your daughter's death and about what her work here entailed?'

'About her death, if she is dead, then nothing. That's what your message told me: nothing. About her work, a little. I know she was studying the long-term effects of the terraforming process upon the plant life of Nuovaperugia, but that's about it. What more can you tell me?'

'Your daughter and her fiancé spent much of their time here away from our little town. Their work took them into the mountains and forests on long survey expeditions. They usually undertook these missions alone; no one had any contact with them for weeks at a time. It was on one such expedition that they met their deaths.'

'What happened?' the Doctor interjected.

'There was an accident.'

'What kind of accident?' Carlo demanded.

'I cannot say.' Pertini continued calmly. 'There was an accident and they both died. That is all.'

'Administrator Pertini, what kind of accident?' The Doctor was insistent.

Pertini paused as if weighing up his options. 'It was some sort of predator. They were attacked and killed by an animal.'

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Adric was getting precisely nowhere in his attempts to find someone to talk to. Very few young people had passed through the square, and those that had done so walked in quiet groups, mostly clutching schoolbooks. They did not stop at the small café. The older people who ordered coffees or beers at neighbouring tables showed no inclination to pass the time of the day with the young Alzarian. Adric was painfully aware that the Doctor had taken the first opportunity to leave him behind and was no doubt unearthing all sorts of information in the company of Carlo, while he, Adric was letting the side down. He could imagine the withering look that the Doctor would give him, when he returned disappointed but not surprised, to discover his failure. After some fifteen minutes he made up his mind. Staying here at the café, he was achieving nothing, and, more to the point, he was getting bored. He might as well go for a walk and explore the town. The place was only small anyway, so he would be bound to be back at the café before the Doctor and Carlo got back. Even if he were not, it wouldn't be difficult for them to find each other again.

Adric moved off in the direction that he had seen the young people taking.

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Carlo felt the Doctor pat his arm supportively, and flashed an appreciative look to his new friend. He allowed the Doctor to continue to put the questions. 'What sort of animal?'

'We really don't know; some sort of native cat or bear perhaps. Dottore, I feel personally very responsible for this tragedy. Signor Minnoli, it was I who sent your daughter and Signor Calandretti out on this mission, unarmed. We were certain that there was no dangerous wildlife in the area, yet they are both now dead. When we found the body it was clear that they had fallen victim to a powerful predator.'

At this the Doctor and Carlo both looked at each other, then at Pertini. The Doctor spoke. 'You recovered a body? Singular? Can we see it?'

'Yes, we found the body of Signor Calandretti. He was buried in the cemetery at the foot of the hill. Of your daughter, Signor Minnoli, I'm afraid there was no trace.'

'But I've looked there,` objected Carlo, `I've seen no sign of his grave.'

'As yet it is unmarked. Signor Calandretti was buried beneath the orange tree in the northwest corner of the graveyard. Now, if you will excuse me, Signori, I have work to do. Please, when you have paid your respects to the unfortunate Signor Calandretti, do stay a while on Nuovaperugia as guests of the colonial administration. Enjoy the facilities we have to offer before you leave. The climate is particularly pleasant at this time of year.' Pertini turned back to his papers, it was clear that the meeting was over.

Carlo and the Doctor turned for the door. They were about to leave, when the Doctor turned back to Pertini. 'One last thing, Administrator: the graveyard. There are an awful lot of young people in there. What's been happening here? What are you afraid to tell us?'

Momentarily caught off-guard, the administrator seemed not to know what to say, but recovered his composure quickly, like the politician he was. 'I haven't the first idea what you're talking about, Dottore. Like on any other world, people die on Nuovaperugia. Young people, old people, all people, Dottore. Nothing's going on, and I'm certainly not scared. Not of you, nor of anything else.'

The Doctor fixed him with the most penetrating look that Carlo had ever seen, his eyes seeming to protrude from his very skull. 'Not afraid?' he barked. 'Well, perhaps you should be, Administrator, perhaps you should be.' With that, the Doctor stalked from the room, Carlo following behind.

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There was no sign of any of the young people whom Adric had watched pass through the square. In fact there was little sign of anyone at all, other than an old woman hurrying home with two full shopping bags, and two similarly elderly men, sitting on chairs outside the door to one of the houses, apparently playing some sort of card game. It soon became clear to the boy that although the town was very picturesque, there was very little here that was actually of interest to him. Certainly he was unlikely to find any answers for the Doctor in the all but deserted, narrow streets.

After some fifteen minutes of increasingly frustrating exploration, Adric found himself on a small but pleasant grassy terrace, bounded on the far side by a low wall. A young mother sat on a bench, while her child played quietly on the grass. Adric realised that he had reached the limit of the town. He walked up to the wall and took in the splendid view. Immediately beyond, a steep slope fell to the farmland and olive groves below. Beyond that he could see thick forest, and, in the distance, shimmering in the heat haze, he could just make out the snowy caps of a high mountain range. He leaned carefully over the wall, straining to make out the TARDIS below. However he soon realised that

the graveyard where he and the Doctor had left their ship was on the other side of the hill. There was no sign of the path that they had climbed earlier; on this side the slope was much steeper, in parts almost vertical.

He turned and smiled at the young woman, and opened his mouth to speak. She smiled back, but before he could utter a word she picked up her child and left Adric alone. Resigned once more to failure, he sat on the bench that the woman had vacated and enjoyed the view.

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The Doctor and Carlo paused by the café only long enough to register that Adric had left. The Doctor sighed and led the way out of the square. 'Come on Carlo, we`ll find the little fool later. We've got things to do.' With Carlo struggling to keep pace, the Doctor raced off down the path to the cemetery at the foot of the hill. Carlo registered the incongruous tall blue box in the corner of the graveyard. Without pausing the Doctor took out what Carlo assumed was a key from one of his pockets, opened a door on the front of the box and went inside. Puzzled, Carlo was about to follow, but before he could do so, the Doctor re-emerged carrying two large shovels.

'Surely you don't mean to…'

'I'm afraid I do, Carlo. It's the only way we can find out what's going on.' The Doctor paused and looked at his new friend, as if registering the look of horror that must have appeared upon his face. He spoke gently. 'Of course, I'll understand if you don't feel you can help. Have a sit down under that tree. You've had a hard time.'

Carlo shook his head. 'No, Doctor. I came here to find out what happened to Nella and Roberto, and if this is what it takes, then I'm in.'

'Good man.' The Doctor patted him on his shoulder and passed him one of the shovels. 'Now, let's see if we can find that grave.'

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She appeared at Adric's side as if from nowhere. She looked a few years older than him, a little taller too, with deeply tanned skin that suggested some time spent under the hot sun of Nuovaperugia. Her torn, almost ragged clothing, her long, dark, unkempt hair and her deep brown eyes that darted from side to side, as if checking her exits, lent her a feral look. Adric watched her making sure that they were alone before she slid onto the bench next to him.

'Hello, I'm Adric. Who are you?' the boy stammered, unsure how to proceed with

the newcomer, and determined not to allow the opportunity to pass to make some progress with the task with his enquiries.

'My name is Antonia. I don't know you. You're not from here, Are you from off-world?'

'Yes, I just arrived today. I'm a traveller.'

'And are you on your own?'

He didn't know why, but he decided immediately that he wasn't going to mention the Doctor. 'Yes. How about you?'

The young woman told him that she had lived all her life on Nuovaperugia and that she had no family. The conversation subsided into silence, Adric wondering how he could broach the subject of the dead young people. He decided upon the direct approach.

'Antonia, what's been happening here? People have been dying, young people. Do you know anything about it? What can you tell me?'

Unlike everyone else whom he or the Doctor had asked, Antonia didn't flinch from the question. She paused as if to consider how to answer, then her wild brown eyes met his and she told him. 'The creature feeds on them.'

The answer took Adric by surprise. 'What creature?'

She shook her head, looking around as if she was sure someone had overheard. 'No, that is enough. I can't say any more.'

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It was exactly where Pertini had described it, under an orange tree in a corner of the cemetery. The grave was unmarked, but a pile of recently turned earth gave away the position. If it hadn't been for the tree, which provided welcome shade from the hot sun, Carlo was sure that the task would have been beyond him, although the Doctor seemed unaffected. As it was the dig was a long process, punctuated by frequent breaks spent resting on the shovels and sipping from bottles of a fizzy, spicy liquid that the Doctor had fetched from his blue box.

It was getting towards the middle of the afternoon, although the sun felt no less hot, when they finally unearthed the rough coffin. The two men began prising at the lid with the shovels. It was soon removed. Carlo had expected it to disgust him, to make him retch, even to make him vomit, but it did none of these. The body was clearly that of his daughter's fiancé. There were some signs of decomposition, but the hot, dry conditions had preserved it surprisingly well. He felt no disgust, only a great sadness.

The body had evidently been buried in the shredded clothes in which it had been found. The face was covered in bruises and scratches but the cause of death was clear:

Roberto's throat had been ripped, or bitten, out.

Carlo climbed out of the grave and slumped to the ground under the tree. 'Pertini was telling the truth then. It was an animal. Nella really is dead.'

'What?' The Doctor didn't seem to be paying attention. Still in the grave, he continued to examine the body. 'What's that you say? Dead? Yes, well, that's very possible; very possible indeed.' Lost in his thoughts, he seemed completely insensitive to any effect that his words might be having upon his friend. 'But I'm not so sure about Signor Pertini's story. After all, Nuovaperugia is a terraformed planet. Before it was transformed to make it habitable for human settlers, there was no life here, no plants and no animals. So where does a predatory animal come from on a world with no indigenous species?'

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No matter how much he pressed her, Antonia would say no more. Finally he gave up. He would have something, at least, to tell the Doctor. Adric became aware that the girl was watching him intently. He turned to her. She really was rather pretty, despite her unkempt appearance. His gaze turned again to the view over the hill. This really was a beautiful place. For the first time in some weeks, probably for the first time since Romana left, he felt himself relax. Here he was in a garden on a beautiful planet, sitting next to a pretty girl. He enjoyed the moment. Adric began to talk to her. He told her about his childhood on Alzarius and about his family. He spoke of his travels with the Doctor, about all of the places they had visited, about Romana and K9 and about the Time Lord himself – although he gave nothing away about his friend, he wasn't sure why. Antonia listened carefully to all he said, nodding or shaking her head in all the right places, but herself saying nothing. The pair had spent some thirty minutes in this way, when the mood was broken in the most violent way possible.

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'I think we need to speak to Signor Pertini again, and I want to find Adric too.' It took much less time to refill the makeshift grave than it had to dig it, then Carlo and the Doctor began to make their way back to the top of the hill, Carlo again struggling to keep up as the Doctor bounded ahead.

'But Doctor, I don't understand. Clearly Roberto was killed by an animal, yet you seem to believe that to be impossible.'

'Oh no, he was killed by an animal all right. I'm just rather puzzled by how it got here. When the first human explorers came to Nuovaperugia, there was nothing at all,

just a rock in a convenient place in the galaxy – that's why it was chosen as the site for a colony. Young Roberto was clearly killed by something large and powerful – by the tooth and claw marks possibly a bear, or something similar – but there are no indigenous species on Nuovaperugia. I can't believe that the colonists brought anything like that with them, but what other possible explanation is there? Unless… Come on, Carlo, we've got to find Adric, now.'

∞

The door to Giuseppe Pertini's office was hurled open, startling the chief administrator, who was going through some papers. The figure of a young boy tumbled in, closely followed by Pertini's personal assistant, protesting at the intrusion. The boy was clearly over-excited, trying to say something, but rendered all but incomprehensible by his anxiety to get the words out. Pertini smiled, recognising the boy. 'It's all right, Sandro, it's always nice to see Georgio.' He turned to the boy and ushered him towards a chair, Sandro left, still muttering indignantly to himself. 'Now, calm down and tell me what's the matter.'

The boy began to breathe more slowly, calming down a little before speaking. His words wiped all humour from Pertini's face. 'It's her, Signor Pertini. Antonella. She has returned.'

'You've seen her? Where? Tell me about it.' The administrator's tone was urgent.

'As soon as I came into the park, I knew it was her. She didn't see me, so I hid in a bush and watched. There was a boy, a young man, she was talking with him. He couldn't have known. They were just talking when it happened. I watched her hold her stomach, as if she were in pain. She bent over double and screamed. The boy was worried and put an arm around her – he should have run then, he might have got away. As I watched, I saw her change. Her hair became longer, her skin became covered in rough fur, her head changed shape, her mouth became an animal's mouth, with huge teeth. Her fingers turned into claws and she became bigger – so much bigger. The boy didn't stand a chance; she gave a great roar and threw herself on him. I think she killed him, or at least knocked him out. Then she picked him up and jumped over the wall, out of sight. I was scared, Signor Pertini, so I came here. I knew you would know what to do.'

∞

Adric hadn't returned to the café. Reluctantly, the waiter had told them that he had been seen leaving with a girl, but he would say no more. The Doctor and Carlo began to search

the narrow streets. The Doctor was becoming increasingly concerned; Carlo caught his friend's mood. 'He can't have gone far, Doctor. Is it the creature? You can't think it might be in the town. Do you think it might have taken Adric?'

'I don't know Carlo, I just don't know. But anything is possible. I have a feeling that the explanation for everything that has been happening on Nuovaperugia may be closer than we thought, dangerously close, in fact. Come on...' He hared off down yet another street, Carlo following behind.

It didn't take them long to reach the grassy terrace. While Carlo checked the area by the wall, the Doctor began examining around the bench. After a moment he was on the point of satisfying himself that there was nothing to find, when something caught his eye. There it was, under a low bush, glinting in the bright sunshine, a small piece of blue and gold in the form of a five-pointed star. The Doctor knew immediately what it was; he picked it up and pocketed it. It was Adric's badge for mathematical excellence. So the boy had been here.

'Doctor, come and look at this.' Carlo was holding up something that he had found. It was a small clump of brown fur.

'Where did you find this?'

'It was by the wall, on a gorse bush. Something has passed this way. Have you any idea what it is?'

'Well, it's animal fur, of course, but I've no idea what kind of animal it's from. I've never seen any quite like this before.'

Before Carlo could question the Doctor further, they were disturbed by the arrival of Pertini, accompanied by two men, all three carrying hunting rifles. 'Have you seen them?' the administrator's tone was urgent.

The Doctor paused and gave him a meaningful look. 'They were here.' He showed Pertini the badge and the fur.

With a grim look, Pertini addressed his men. 'Aldo, Marco, spread out, search the area. See if you can find anything else, there may be some indication as to which way they went. And be careful, she's dangerous.' The two men began to examine the area, rifles at the ready.

'Doctor...'

'Yes, Carlo, you go with them, the more the better, I suspect.'

∞

Adric stirred and began to open his eyes. Where was he? It looked like some sort of cave. He tried to sit up, but as soon as he did so his head began to swim and the blackness began

to reclaim him. He lay still. A head injury then. Anything else? Carefully he began to flex his fingers and toes and in turn to move his arms and legs. He knew as soon as he tested his left arm that it was broken.

Something was moving in the cave entrance; from where he lay in the darkness, he could see a silhouette as it passed the light. It looked like a large bear, certainly an animal, but shuffling around on two legs, snuffling and grunting to itself. The girl. He had been talking to her just before the attack. Had the creature taken her too? Gingerly he turned his head to look for her, but apart from the creature, he was alone. Then he remembered.

The creature was the girl. He had watched the transformation happen. He had seen her change from a young girl into this creature, which had attacked him.

His captor heard him move and gave a warning growl. Adric lay still. The pain in his head and in his arm became too much for him and he lapsed back into unconsciousness.

∞

Left alone with Pertini, the Doctor turned on the administrator. 'Now, Signor Chief Administrator, I think it's about time you were honest with me. My young friend's life is in danger and I warn you, Pertini, I shall hold you responsible if anything happens to him.'

Pertini nodded thoughtfully. 'Very well, Dottore, but please be quick.'

'It's the Dysonian radiation, I assume. I noticed the high levels when we arrived.'

'We think there was an error made during the terraforming process. In any event, when the first settlers arrived here, they discovered the high levels almost immediately and thought little of it. However as the years passed it became clear that something in the makeup of the planet was reacting with the radiation and producing strange effects. At first this was confined to some of the animals – birth mutations and so on – but in recent years it has become much worse.'

'Your children have been affected.'

'By no means all of them, but more and more. They can seem unaffected for years before it happens. We don't know what triggers it, but something causes a transformation. They change into savage murderous creatures, beyond all reason or help. All we can do is hunt them down. What else is there to do? And now the effects are spreading further. Even young people who were not born here, some of those who have come to live and work here, are being hit by this terrible affliction. Antonella was one such. We must find her, Dottore. If she hasn't already killed your friend, she will do soon.'

'Antonella? Her name is Antonella? It's her, isn't it? Carlo's daughter Nella, the creature didn't kill her, she is the creature.'

'And she must be hunted down, Dottore, for the sake of your friend, for all of our sakes.'

'Pertini, no,' the Doctor said angrily. 'She's Carlo's daughter, and the victim of a scientific disaster: you have a duty to help them, you can't just slaughter her. Help me find her, I may be able to do something.' Pertini hesitated. The Doctor spoke more softly. 'You're not a killer, Pertini; you're a good man, a public servant. You don't need to do this.'

At that moment they were disturbed by a shout from Carlo, who was too far away to have overheard this exchange. 'Doctor, over here.' The Doctor and Pertini ran over to where Carlo was standing by the wall. 'It's blood.'

The Doctor tested the red splash on the wall with his finger and carefully tasted it. 'Alzarian. It's Adric's.'

'And look over here.' Carlo was leaning over the wall. 'It's not much of a path. Easy to miss, but it leads somewhere.' The two friends looked at each other, then as one jumped over the wall and began following the narrow track. Pertini and his men, Aldo and Marco, followed.

The steep track levelled out onto a narrow rocky ledge. The Doctor leaned over to inspect the vertiginous drop and whistled through his teeth. The small party followed the ledge carefully, in single file. After no more than five minutes, they came to the overgrown entrance to what appeared to be a cave. They waited, the Doctor listening intently, but hearing nothing. He turned to Pertini. 'Did you know about this cave, Signor Pertini?'

'No, I had no idea it was here. There have always been stories of caves in the hillside, but few people come down this side, the slope's too steep.'

'Shall we...?' The Doctor indicated the entrance. 'And remember, Pertini: no shooting.'

'You have my word, Doctor; unless it becomes absolutely necessary.'

Side by side, the Doctor and the chief administrator entered the cave, followed by Carlo, with Aldo and Marco bringing up the rear.

Before their eyes had even got used to the darkness, and with an inhuman roar, the creature was upon Pertini. The Doctor reacted the quickest and attempted to push the creature off. Aldo and Marco were taken off guard. They raised their rifles trying to get a clean shot, but it was impossible without hitting the administrator. Finally they threw themselves at the creature. Together with the Doctor and Carlo they managed to free Pertini, who scrambled to his feet. Knocked off balance, the creature spun around, coming face to face with one of its attackers. It raised its huge clawed paw to strike Carlo, then stopped. A confused look came over the creature's face, almost one of recognition, as it faced its father. All Carlo seemed to see was the creature that threatened them. The

Antonella creature backed away, towards the cave entrance, as if unsure what to do.

The Doctor smiled and took a step towards the creature, 'Hello, I'm the Doctor and this is Carlo, Signor Pertini, Aldo and Marco. Who are you?' The Doctor reached into his pocket and proffered a small paper bag. 'Would you like a jelly baby?' The creature took a cautious step towards him, but then backed off. The Doctor took another step forward, still offering the sweets, the creature gave a ferocious growl and smashed the bag from the Doctor's hand. He retreated hurriedly. The creature, sensing the advantage, snarled again, and stepped towards the Time Lord.

'Stand back, Doctor.' It was Carlo, who had picked up one of the fallen rifles and was training it on the creature, clearly preparing to shoot.

'Carlo, no!' the Doctor lunged for the gun-barrel, knocking it away. There was a shot, but it ricocheted harmlessly off the cavern roof. The Doctor took the gun and threw it to the floor.

The creature seemed to study Carlo and began to whimper softly. Then before anyone could react, it gave a terrifying roar, turned, ran from the cave and without hesitation, threw itself from the ledge into the clear space beyond. The Doctor shook his head sadly, Marco and Aldo dusted themselves down and Pertini, and Carlo looked over the edge for any sign of the creature. There was none.

They came back into the cave. Carlo spoke. 'That creature, was that...'

The Doctor cut in. 'Yes, Carlo, that was the creature that killed Nella and Roberto.' He shot Pertini a meaningful look. The administrator nodded. Carlo sank to the floor and began to weep for his daughter. Pertini sat beside him and put a consoling arm around his shoulder.

'Adric!' The Doctor suddenly remembered his companion. A groan told him where the boy lay. He was relieved to find him alive and, apart from his broken arm and a slight concussion, unharmed. 'It's good to see you Adric,' the Doctor smiled.

∞

The mood was sombre as the small party made their way back up the track towards the town. Supported by Aldo and Marco, Adric followed Carlo, with the Doctor and Pertini taking the lead. The Doctor looked seriously at Pertini. 'This is such a beautiful world, Giuseppe, but you know that this can't go on.'

'Yes, Doctor, I know. As soon as we get back, I intend to contact the colonial authorities and ask for an evacuation of everyone under the age of thirty.'

'You'll stay?'

'Yes, I was born here, Doctor, I've lived here all my life, I'm too old to move and

anyway, I don't suppose I'm in too much danger.'

'No, probably not. You know it is possible that a solution may be found to the radiation problem.'

'Yes, but that's in the long term. For now, the Nuovaperugia colony is all but finished. The children will leave – as will their parents and families. Only we older ones will remain. For now at least, mine will be the last generation of Nuovaperugians.'

'It's sad, Giuseppe, very sad, but I'm sure this is the right decision. You and your forebears have created a beautiful world here. Sadly it's not a world where you can live.'

The group fell into silence as they reached the top of the hill, climbing over the wall back into the town. Pertini, Carlo, Aldo and Marco turned to head back to the town hall. Falling behind the group, the Doctor spoke quietly to his companion. 'Come on, Adric, let's get back to the TARDIS and sort out your arm.' Adric winced at the reminder of his pain. With a silent wave of goodbye to the retreating backs of Pertini and Carlo, the pair slipped away and headed down the hill towards the space and time machine.

As he set the coordinates and flipped a few random switches, the Doctor was even more convinced that a change in his life was in store. 'Ah well,' he sighed to himself resignedly, 'whatever lies ahead, I'm just going to have to face it.' With a familiar thump the TARDIS began to dematerialize and headed off into the vortex.

Façade of Demons

Andy Lane and Craig Hinton

This story was written around 1986, while Craig and I were still at University, and was published originally in issue 2 of a fanzine called Rats Tales *which was edited by the talented and incomparable Jackie Marshall. That issue also contained a* Dangermouse *story by Paul Cornell, a* Blake's Seven *story by Justin Richards and a letter by Alan Barnes. As was quite common in those days, we were trying to take an anomaly in the programme – in this case, the fact that the Time Lords we saw on screen during the time of the Fourth Doctor and later were no match for the powerful entities we saw during the Second and Third Doctor's time, and find some explanation that made sense in terms of continuity. It's complete fanwank, by definition. The story starts, of course, with a scene from* Arc of Infinity *as seen through the eyes of an observing character from* The Armageddon Factor.

Façade...

"It's too late," cried the Doctor desperately. "Omega controls the Matrix!" His voice rang out hollowly in the empty chamber as his finger pointed dramatically at the screen on the wall before him.

Drax turned away from his position in the doorway. He didn't understand any of it, but already he had seen enough. Slowly and deliberately he began to walk down the corridor away from the President's office. Behind him were the voices – the Doctor and his young girl companion – in front of him there was only the huge, echoing silence of the Citadel. The voices grew louder as they left the office and ran down the corridor towards him. The faint hope that flickered in his heart died when they ran past without even seeing him. He sighed and began the long walk back towards his TARDIS.

He had been prepared for almost anything when he had returned to Gallifrey. Returned home. After all, no renegade Time Lord had ever returned of his own free will before and there was no telling quite what his reception would be. But he had to come back. There were too many deals gone wrong, too many disgruntled business empires after his blood. The market was dead, there was none left to work for any more.

And he was lonely. In an aeon of travelling he had only met one friend... So he set course for Gallifrey in the patched and creaking Type 50 that he called home; expecting guards, imprisonment, termination...

Almost anything...

Not empty corridors. Not dusty rooms and cracked walls. Not powerless transduction barriers which allowed him to land unhindered and unheeded. The huge doors leading to the Outer Wastes were wide open, and orange dust swirled carelessly through the Capitol building. He couldn't believe it at first; running around screaming, convinced of some trick. Exhaustion finally dropped him panting to the floor where, in the cold light of sanity, he accepted the truth.

Gallifrey was dead.

And then a TARDIS arrived. Drax stumbled towards the source of the noise; half convinced it was an illusion, a figment of his own derangement. By the time he arrived the occupants had exited, and one of them he recognised. An old friend from far away Academy days; Theta Sigma, the Doctor. Another renegade like himself. He had regenerated since the Zeos-Atrios war brought them together last. The girl companion was new, and a considerable improvement on that snooty Time Lady he'd had last time, but the Doctor was unmistakable. Trembling with relief, Drax stepped out to greet him.

The Doctor looked straight through Drax as though he wasn't there. He ran down the corridor with his companion at his side. And then he began to talk to himself. And then he fell to the floor, unconscious.

It was then that Drax realised that one of them was insane. So, half-hoping that something would happen to explain everything, something so simple that he and old Thete could laugh over it later, Drax followed the two newcomers round the Citadel. Wherever they went they talked to thin air; argued, cajoled and chatted to nothing.

And now in the distance ahead he could hear the massive Time Engines of the Doctor's TARDIS lift it into Vortex. He was alone again.

"What's going on?" He cried to himself. "What's going on here?"

"The answer is not meant for you to know," rasped a deep voice all around him.

"It is unfortunate that you came," echoed a lighter tone. As Drax turned he was consumed, consumed with fire and ice. Simultaneously his body froze in the black interstellar cold and burned with pure white fire. Even as his body exploded in a soundless concussion of energy he screamed one last despairing question.

"WHY...?"

Daemons...

"You see?" said the white haired old man accusingly. "Others are beginning to suspect. How long will it be before we are unable to contain the truth?"

The White Guardian raised the tall glass to his lips and sipped at the amber liquid

it contained. Gently he replaced it on the wicker table between them. The table was an illusion, as was the wine and indeed their own identities, but it amused them to meet that way. If an infinity of races believed them to exist as entities rather than as physical quantities like heat and light, why should they argue?

"The truth will be witheld as long as we deem proper. It is unwise to speculate, my friend." The Black Guardian waved a gauntleted hand nonchalantly in his adversary's direction. "The true reason for our interference on Gallifrey could have a disastrous affect on the Doctor were he to stumble across it accidentally. He must be guided towards it." He replaced the goblet of rich, dark liqueur on the table before him. Light sparkled from multiple reflections within the glass. Any escaping in his direction was instantly absorbed by the darkfall around him.

"Of course; that is obvious. The Doctor is far too valuable to us for him to be confronted with the death of his entire race unprepared. Hence the period of..." the White Guardian searched for the correct word "...readjustment. Let him see his civilisation seem to decay from within, collapse and finally perish. Once he has come to terms with their passing away, we may act. We shall continue to provide Time Lords for him whenever he returns to Gallifrey. When illusion has died away, he will be ready."

The Guardian of Darkness in Time raised one eyebrow quizzically. "You feel sure that he will contact us?"

"He will contact *me*," the other corrected. "The Doctor is no simpleton, but the true nature of the annihilation of the Time Lords is too deep even for him to discern unaided."

"And when contact has been made, will he be told everything?"

"That, my friend, depends on the Doctor. It may be too much for him to bear all at once. To discover the death of his homewor1d is one matter, to discover that his own companion contaminated his people with a virus that proved fatal is another."

The White Guardian smiled a small, ironic smile. "I agree, although the blame lies with the Time Lords both for their isolationist policy and for allowing this... Zoe Herriot... to proceed unquarantined into their Capitol. The Doctor could not be expected to know that was what a cold for her was a fatal disease for Time Lord society. The Doctor may develop an unhealthy guilt complex, something we most definitely do not want."

The Black Guardian laughed darkly to himself. "How ironic that the Doctor's long association with humans has led to his own immunity." He drained the goblet, which instantly re-filled itself.

"Exactly," replied the White Guardian. "And once the Doctor has come to terms with the truth behind our facade, it will then be time for him to learn of our second secret." A wry smile crossed his face. "I wonder how he will take that?"

The Black Guardian cackled softly. "I wonder..." He lifted the goblet once more. "The departure of the Time lords of Gallifrey leaves a vacuum in the natural hierarchy of the Cosmos. The Doctor will have to accept that others are waiting in the wings for the honour of becoming Time Lords."

The other reached for his glass. "I propose a toast. To the new Lords of Time."

Good and Evil raised their glasses together.

"To the Daleks!" proclaimed the White Guardian.

"To the Daleks!" the Black Guardian repeated, relishing the taste of the liqueur. Yes, he wondered, how would the Doctor respond to that?

Tempus Fugit

Jen Leavesley

Tempus Fugit *is a missing scene type of piece, written to fill in the gaps in a very brief section of* The Crystal Bucephalus.

The Fifth Doctor fell out of the Vortex, wracked with pain, and landed on an icy planet a long time out from the Bucephalus and the story going on around him. Collapsed in the snow, he was taken in by two natives of the planet and nursed back to health. His only way back to the Bucephalus and the events in which he was caught up was to build a restaurant and wait for the Grid to notice them.

It took five years for that to happen. In those five years, the Doctor lived as a resident of the planet, running a restaurant, involving himself in local affairs and indeed politics, and so on. Craig mentions the entire situation in a fleeting few paragraphs, giving us the beginning and end but not the middle. I decided to pick it up from there, filling in the details and giving a start to what would be a fantastic story if taken all the way to the end of those five years.

The pavement seemed to ripple in front of the Doctor as his vision swam. His balance betrayed him; the hard ground rose up and slammed into his chest, knocking the breath from his lungs.

Freezing pain bit into the palm that held the cold metal of the actuator rod. His nerves screamed, too efficiently reminding him of the injuries he'd sustained on New Alexandria.

He glimpsed his surroundings though the agony, briefly: the dusky pink sky, the tall dome shaped stone huts, and falling snow as far as the eye could see. He had no idea where he was, but it was clear he wasn't in France, and he doubted it was 1791.

His dulled mind registered the cold, his cheek and temple pressed to the frozen ground. The ceaselessly falling snow began to blanket his form as he lay there. He tried to garner his strength, but it was futile. The sensation of unbearable cold faded, gradually replaced by the alluring warmth of darkness. He succumbed almost willingly.

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Pfifl and Laklis trotted back to their stone hut after the evening's meeting at the Senate; the fur they were naturally covered in helping to keep them warm in the frozen temperatures of their home world.

The Hroth were a fur covered species that usually walked on all fours but could stand tall, with dog-like faces, large clumsy paws, and ears that wagged when they turned their heads. They were an empathic race; sensing feelings and forming unbreakable bonds with members of their family to the point that loss of a family member would lead to pining away, possibly to death.

'Do you smell something?' Laklis asked her mate. Her sensitive muzzle sniffed the air as her light yellow coloured striped coat was tossed about in the bitter wind.

'What are you on about?' Pfifl thought she must be imagining some smell, but then the scent caught his attention as well. 'Hold on, I smell it too.' He turned his dark head to follow it, sniffing the air purposefully. 'It smells like a… humanoid of some kind.'

Following the scent, they dug through the snow.

The man, all but buried, was unconscious; pale as a ghost, his hair was soaked from the snow. His blue silk outfit had gotten wet and was far too thin for the harsh climate. Even more curious, there were no footprints or tracks leading to or from his body, nor was the snow disturbed in any way. He was simply there, from out of nowhere.

'Is he dead?'

Pfifl held a dark brown paw up to the man's nose, and felt slow, weak breaths ruffle the fine hairs between the pads. He shook his head, sending his pink ears flapping about. He leaned his head down toward the man's chest and listened intently.

'I can hear two hearts, beating.'

Laklis's eyes widened. 'What shall we do?'

'I can think of nothing else but to take him home.' Pfifl hefted the nearly frozen man onto his back, and carried him into their nearby stone hut.

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'What is this in his hand?' Pfifl asked absently, as he tended to the man. Whatever it was, it was black, about a foot long, and frozen solid to his palm. 'Fetch some warm water,' he said to his mate. 'We must prise it loose before it burns him any more.'

Laklis filled the kettle and put it on the fire, while Pfifl arranged the man under some blankets on the spare bed in the corner of their hut. Laklis brought over a bowl of warm water and they immersed his hand, rod and all. The rod soon came loose, but it left behind blisters in the palm of his hand and fingers.

They quickly undressed the man, and got him into an ill-fitting thermal top and trousers that hung on his slight frame. Together they managed to get some oversized socks onto his feet, snagging icy toes with clumsy paws. Laklis rubbed his hair dry with towels and pulled a woollen hat with ear holes onto his head. Pfifl prepared warm compresses for

his face and forehead to re-warm the skin that was all but frostbitten.

Laklis wrinkled her furry brow. 'Is he hypothermic?'

'How would I know? There can't be many species with a double heartbeat... Maybe this temperature is normal for him.' He paused, thinking quickly. 'We must warm the room, keep him underneath the warm layers, and treat any frostbite.'

She nodded, her ears wagging.

He bared his teeth at her in an appreciative smile, and set to piling on more blankets.

She stood by the bed and watched the man. As she did so, she felt a pang of nostalgia for days long past, as memories of childhood illnesses and bedside vigils with their son fleeted through her memory as she hovered beside the man. Tamor. Their only son. She missed him so much it hurt.

Shortly after he'd been bundled up, the man began shivering, the first sign of movement since he had been found. He was also muttering incoherently, but showing no signs of consciousness.

Pfifl opened the blisters on the skin on the side of the man's face and most of his right hand and bandaged them as he'd learned to do long ago. All Hroth were trained in basic frost aid, because of the severity of the weather on their home planet.

A hoarse moan came from the man's throat from time to time, and he tossed back and forth on the bed. Pfifl and Laklis were becoming increasingly concerned about what pain he might be in. Apart from the frostbitten skin, they had found no broken bones or lacerations on his body, but he seemed distressed in some way.

Laklis looked at the man. 'Time to call for help for him, despite the hour?'

Pfifl considered it. 'Fetch Rnolym, please.'

∞

Not long after, Rnolym knocked at the entrance to the Hroth's stone hut. A tall humanoid doctor from the planet Meny'otl, his presence in their doorway both startled and reassured the Hroth. He was terrifying to look at; a huge beast of a man, with a threatening body language which was completely incongruous to his persona.

He had shadowed eyes hiding behind a shock of thick dark hair. His voice was quiet and gentle, perhaps a learned habit. He was without a doubt a gentle giant.

'Greetings. Thank you for coming so early in the morning.' Pfifl opened the door and bared his teeth in a smile at the giant. 'He's this way.'

Rnolym ducked his way into the hut and followed Pfifl, who had dropped down to all fours, over to the man bundled up under many blankets. Laklis bared her teeth

nervously and spoke up. 'We just found him not long ago, in the snow near our hut. If we hadn't brought him inside, he'd surely have soon died.' Rnolym knelt beside the bed and pulled out a medical scanner, holding it above the man's shivering body. It whirred and clicked its diagnoses out on the small screen.

'Of Gallifreyan origins. Moderate hypothermia. Core temperature rising slowly. Second degree frostbite, blistered, healing rapidly. Biochemical markers from recent asystole in the left cardiac muscle, though it appears that it was restarted quickly enough. Recent psychic shock of indeterminate cause.'

'Gallifreyan? Are you sure?' Pfifl gaped at the medic, his mind ignoring all other words.

Rnolym waved the scanner over him again. 'Quite. Binary cardiovascular system, respiratory bypass, superior interfacing between the hemispheres of the brain, and presence of a lindal gland. He is definitely Gallifreyan; possibly even a Time Lord.'

Laklis' muzzle fell open, turning a reddish colour.

Rnolym laid the scanner beside him, and his features hardened. 'Why did you wait so long to call me?'

'We weren't sure if we should bother you.'

'Bother me? You find a Time Lord nearly frozen to death near your hut, and you didn't want to *bother me*?' Rnolym gaped at the Hroth. They were so unassuming by nature, but this took the biscuit.

'We didn't want you implicated with us,' Laklis piped in.

'It's too late to go around hiding; I'm already implicated. Everyone knows we're friends.' Rnolym paused, addressing the issue of the patient. 'Besides, to be honest, it seems to me what he really needs is time to rest, to heal by himself. You did well.'

Pfifl shrugged off the praise and looked up at him, an intense look on his dog-like features. 'It is very important that he survives.'

Rnolym looked at Pfifl for a time, studying his expression, understanding the Hroth bonding and that Pfifl had bonded with the Gallifreyan. It meant that Pfifl would be fiercely protective of the man, to the death if necessary. He was one of their family now, and nothing or no one, would come between them.

Rnolym turned and carried on setting up some medical equipment. He hung a drip bag from a hook on the wall, uncovered the man's bandaged hand and began turning it over, looking for a suitable vein in the arm. Needle inserted into the skin and secured, Rnolym started the drip.

Once he was satisfied with his work, he stood, and left strict instructions with the Hroth on how to care for the stranger.

'We cannot thank you enough.' Laklis and Pfifl saw him to the door of their hut.

'My pleasure.' Rnolym shook his paw with considerable strength. His expression hardened. 'If there is any change, call me, day or night.' He turned and stepped out into the harsh elements.

∞

There was a knock at the hut door a few hours after Rnolym had left. Laklis answered the door, and was stunned to see the tall, thin, slightly hulking form of Brastus standing in the doorway, looking especially sour.

'Come in. Pfifl's this way.' Laklis waved him in.

Brastus, governor of the town, ducked in the hut, leaning over as he as he glared towards the shivering stranger on the bed in the far corner of the hut. 'So it is true.' He smoothed his longish dark hair to one side, wiping snow out of it.

Pfifl stood, with a slight growl. 'What is?'

'You're harbouring an unregistered alien presence on this planet.'

Laklis frowned, as much as her snout would let her. 'How do you know if he is registered or not? How did you even know he was here?'

'Word gets round quickly.' He paused, eyes narrowing. 'I've been through the recent registrations. There is no record of this man; he is here without permission. And you're keeping him here without telling anyone? Did you think of the medical, if not social, reasons why that might not be a very wise thing to do? He's injured. He should be in hospital.'

Pfifl spoke up to defend himself. 'We are perfectly capable of treating his injuries right here in our home. And with the help of Rnolym –'

'Aaah. Rnolym, that foolish Meny'otlan friend of yours. The two of you together, conspiring to overthrow the Senate!' he spat. Brastus took a deep breath, and said angrily, 'It comes to this. I know about this stranger, and if you do not take him to get registered, and soon, I will have to inform the judiciaries that you are in fact breaking the law!'

The stranger moaned slightly, as if the raised voices were disturbing him.

Pfifl bared his teeth in a placating smile. 'Whatever you say, Brastus. You know we don't want any trouble.'

'Then follow the rules that have been laid down for everyone to follow, not just the humanoids, and there won't be any trouble!' Brastus turned and stormed out of their hut.

Laklis closed the door behind him. 'I knew this was a bad idea.' She wiped at her brow, her paws trembling slightly. 'He could have called the guards there and then, and had them take the man away! And what would that mean for us?'

'Rnolym would have defended us all had it come to that!' He paused, sighing slightly. 'You worry too much. I will take care of it tomorrow when I go back to the office. Rnolym has all the information we need in that scanner of his, and I can register the man under a pseudonym, for now.'

Laklis stared at Pfifl intently. 'Rnolym can't mend everything. Just... don't make things worse for us, please.'

'I wouldn't do anything to jeopardise our family...' Pfifl sat down at the table. 'Besides, the man is as important to me now as our son ever was. You know how easily I bond. He is part of our family now.'

She nuzzled his fur. 'Yes, I suppose he is.'

∞

Rnolym came to see to the stranger's health first thing the next morning. The man was healing faster than expected, and seemed to be in quite good condition.

Pfifl and Laklis were having their breakfast, sharing warm tea with Rnolym, when keen ears heard a sound. Laklis turned sharply with a gasp. The stranger helplessly burbled something musical, almost as if he were singing. His piercing blue eyes shot open and surveyed the ceiling and wall of the hut. Pfifl nearly dropped his tea, while Rnolym rushed over to the bedside. The man's hand reached up to his bandaged temple and cheek and explored, like someone who had just lost their glasses groping around blindly. He examined his bandaged hand and the cannula in his arm.

'So tired...' his eyelids fluttered, and he lost consciousness.

Rnolym checked the drip, and then examined him, checking his breathing and pulses, raising an eyelid to find an almost entirely dilated and non responsive pupil. The scanner revealed almost no brain activity at all. 'He's deeply comatose.' Rnolym double-checked the scanner. 'He must be in some sort of self induced healing trance. I've heard that Gallifreyans have that talent. '

Pfifl breathed a sigh of relief, his ears gently flapping.

'I shall remain here in case he wakes up again.'

'What about your other patients?'

'All taken care of. I've called in a junior doctor to cover me for the day.' He folded his hands in his lap.

Laklis bared her teeth in a smile. 'More tea then, while we wait?'

∞

Raam switched his commlink on, and Brastus' face filled the screen.

The thin nervous man spoke to his superior. 'The information you asked for, Boss.'

'Yes?'

'They've cobbled together a registration for the man. Its faked, entirely, but it looks legitimate enough. He's called Doctor John Smith, and he isn't one of the usual species of refugees. Listed as "unknown."'

Brastus paused, thinking. 'Thank you, Raam. That's all I needed to know.'

'What are you going to do?'

'Pay them a visit tomorrow. Let them know that I know, and we are not going to stand for it. Frighten the life out of them. The usual, really.' Brastus smiled briefly, and closed the call.

∞

A few hours passed. Rnolym sat at the table, head drooping with sleep, while Laklis quietly prepared the evening's meal. Pfifl studied some documents in preparation for the next Senate meeting. They heard the man stir in his bed.

'It's not supposed to be like this!' He sat bolt upright in the bed, banging his head on the low stone wall of the hut. He reached up to cradle his wounded head with a slung arm.

'Ouch.'

A very large humanoid knelt next to his bed, wielding a medical scanner. He spoke with a voice that was so incongruous to his face that it sounded disembodied.

'Hello there. You're among friends. Don't worry.'

The stranger smiled gently, and then looked inquisitive. 'The bandages?'

'Frostbite.' The giant smiled. 'I'm Rnolym. I'm the local medical man in these parts. Pfifl and Laklis summoned me to help.'

'Ah.' The man fiddled with his drip tubing, the bandages on his hand. 'Did...?'

'You suffered some frostbite and hypothermia. You've been unconscious for three days.'

He nodded. 'When one faints in the snow on a new planet after being ripped out of Vortex, one should expect some frostbite and a few days of raving in his sleep. If one survives the exposure, that is.' He looked around at the somewhat rustic surroundings, and hazarded, 'Which century is this?'

'Beginning of the sixty-third.'

'Hmm.'

Pfifl felt so compelled to go to the man and greet him that it never occurred to him that he might not speak Hrothi. He padded over on all fours and nuzzled the man's chest. 'I am glad you are awake, and seemingly unscathed.' he told him.

∞

The man looked at the Hroth quizzically, trying desperately to figure out why he couldn't instantly understand him. A language that wasn't translated for him; no one to do the translating.

The TARDIS. Lost to him, so far away that her voice wasn't even a faint whisper in his mind. He reached out as far as he could to touch her, but the distance was too great.

He gripped his forehead with a hand, unable to articulate his loss. *His* TARDIS. He felt a pang of grief for his beloved machine. She must be back in France, 1791, waiting for him to return.

'You don't speak Hrothi?' Rnolym asked.

He shook his head, his attention diverted back to the Hroth. 'You see, the TARDIS translates every language I hear.'

'The TARDIS is your companion?'

'You could say that; she's my ship. We've travelled together for a very long time.'

Rnolym grinned gently. 'Hrothi – it's very like Pakhar. Just listen to them; you'll catch on quickly enough. I didn't speak a word of Hrothi before I arrived either.'

'Arrived?' The man paused, realising how silly his question would sound, but asked it regardless. 'What planet is this?'

'Pella Satyrnis.'

He gaped at the gigantic man. Quietly, 'I had no idea.' He was far from New Alexandria. So very far out, in both time and space, from known civilisation. And far from rescue. 'I'm the Doctor. Just the Doctor.'

Laklis shuffled closer, and cleared her throat. Rnolym took the hint. 'Your rescuers – Laklis, and her mate, Pfifl. Without them, you'd have frozen to death that night.'

The Doctor nodded. He looked directly at the two Hroth. 'I don't really know what to say, nor do I speak Hrothi it seems, so I hope you understand that I am grateful for all you have done for me. Thank you.' He smiled at them.

Laklis bared her teeth in a smile, and Pfifl nuzzled his chest.

Rnolym grinned. 'They understand the gist of it. And they like you.'

'Well, I'm touched.' He replied, a bit tetchier than he intended to, rubbing his

temple absently with his other hand. 'I'm also very tired.'

'Get some rest.'

'Yes, rest...' He leaned back with a sigh and his eyes closed. He soon drifted off.

∞

'Will he be all right?' Pfifl asked.

'He'll sleep for a time. I'll send round my junior medic tomorrow, since it appears the worst is over.' Rnolym looked much relieved.

'Much appreciated.' The Hroth saw him to the door.

Laklis bared her teeth, and Pfifl offered a paw, which Rnolym shook with vigour.

'Take care.' He stepped out into the numbingly cold evening, instantly coated with the falling snow.

∞

Raphael knocked on the door of the hut very early the next morning. Brastus stood behind him, waiting.

Laklis answered the door, peering out into the doubly bright sunlight with one paw shading her eyes.

'Hello. I'm Raphael, from Rnolym's practice. Is the patient awake?'

'Actually, yes. He's breakfasting now after a good night's rest. Come inside.'

Brastus pushed his way to the doorway. 'Actually, I thought I might join you.'

Laklis looked unsure, but stepped aside to let Raphael in. Brastus forced his way inside, knowingly unwelcome, but determined nonetheless.

Pfifl sat at the table, catching up on the morning's news. He looked up in surprise. 'Raphael, why did you bring him with you?'

'I didn't, he just happened to turn up at the door at the same time I did.'

Brastus managed a wry smile. 'I came to inform you that I've discovered your little hackjob registration, and I highly doubt his name is John Smith or that he's a doctor of anything. Still, he is legal now; well done keeping yourselves out of trouble.'

Pfifl bared his teeth in a proud grin at the choice of names that Rnolym had suggested.

Raphael took off his gloves, hat, and coat, revealing outlandishly coloured trousers and garishly matching tie, and sat down near the fire to warm up

Brastus continued. 'Besides, I'm interested to know more about this stranger.'

Raphael smiled. 'By all means, stay and watch. There's nothing to see, really, so you're wasting your time, but that's your lookout.'

Brastus crossed his arms and leaned against the wall of the hut. 'Well, whenever you're ready, some of us have other duties to attend to today.'

Raphael winced slightly at the Governor's patronising, but continued.

'Doctor?'

The Doctor, who had been silently observing the interactions between the Hroth and the tall dark haired newcomer, smiled widely. 'Yes?'

'How are you this morning?'

'Feeling much better, thank you.'

Pfifl figured he had better introduce the Governor, before fur flew. 'This is Brastus, Governor of our town, Lberapax.'

Brastus bowed his head slightly in the Doctor's direction.

'Delighted to meet you,' the Doctor replied, slightly warily.

Raphael pointed at the medical equipment on the floor beside his bed. 'Did you do that yourself?'

The Doctor cleared his throat. 'Take out the drip and remove the splint? Yes, I did, not long after I woke this morning. I am a doctor, you know.'

'A medical man?'

'Amongst other things, yes.'

Brastus narrowed his eyes, and suspicions began forming in his mind about the stranger.

'I see.' Raphael didn't, but it wasn't really important. 'Well, I'll take all that back with me; Rnolym will be very please to hear of your progress.'

'Hmm. I'm even learning Hrothi. Easy language to learn, really, once you know where its roots lie. Rnolym gave me the first hint, and I took it from there.'

'That's fantastic,' Raphael smiled.

'A doctor of medicine among other things, named John Smith, who learns languages in a day and heals very quickly. That's about as clear as a muddy lake.' Brastus eyed the Doctor suspiciously.

'That's the way I like it,' the Doctor said, crisply.

'Do you now.'

Raphael glared at the Governor. 'Are you going to let me carry on?'

Brastus's face reddened. 'By all means. I've seen all I need to see, to know that there is more here than meets the eye. I still think he should have been taken to a hospital, and that keeping him with the Hroth points to a larger purpose, somehow. And I will find out what is really going on!' He turned and walked briskly out the door of the hut,

slamming the door behind him.

∞

'You've made an enemy. That's a shame, young man. Once you're known to be against the Governor and his cohorts, then you're relegated to the side of the Hroth, you know,' Pfifl noted.

Raphael smiled. 'Well, I work for Rnolym, I'm already on the wrong side. I'm used to it.'

Laklis piped in, 'That's true.'

The Doctor interrupted. 'Side? Of what, may I ask?'

'Of the fence. Or coin. Whatever. This planet used to be solely inhabited by the Hroth, who called their home Jora. But refugees from the great War fled here and settled, pushing the Hroth into smaller and more confined spaces. The settlers, humanoid, mostly from the Earth colony on Kephathar Minor, started their own government, renamed the planet after something in their own culture and the Hroth were relegated to second citizen status. Shoved in a corner while strangers took over their land, their government, their world.'

The Doctor sighed. 'I know the form, all too well. Brastus reminds me of a few megalomaniacs I've known in my time. I rather enjoy toppling megalomaniacs...' He grinned. Pfifl bared his teeth at Laklis. The man they rescued might just be their chance to change things on Pella, for the better. He turned back to his newsreading, buried in his own thoughts. 'Speaking of megalomaniacs, does anyone know where the black rod I had in my hand when I was found has gotten off to?'

'Er, under your bed.' Laklis looked puzzled.

The Doctor reached down and found the actuator rod. 'This may be my ticket back to New Alexandria.'

Raphael's eyed widened. 'Is that where you came from?'

'Yes, before I was collapsed in the snow, I was on New Alexandria in the apparently far flung future, sorting out another mess. Out of the frying pan, into the icebox.' He grasped the rod. Nothing happened.

Raphael's curiosity was piqued. 'Does that happen often?'

'What?' the Doctor answered, distractedly fiddling with the tiny switches on the bottom of it.

'You, going from the frying pan to the icebox?' He punctuated his question with a small grin.

'Not intentionally.' His tone implied that it happened frequently.

Laklis noted quietly, 'The rod got very wet.' Inside, she hoped it would never work again from water damage. That would keep the Doctor here with them, where they needed him.

The Doctor frowned. 'Ah. No wonder it won't work. I'll have to dry each component separately.' Unscrewing the end, with a sigh and only one hand, he began trying to disassemble it.

Raphael stood, feeling unnecessary. 'You seem to be healing well enough, with no lasting problems from the exposure, so if you've no more need for me today, I'll come back tomorrow and check up on you.'

'Mmm.' The Doctor looked up briefly, and bent back to his work.

∞

Brastus stomped through the snow to his gubernatorial office. Ever since leaving the Hroth hut, he had been in a bad mood, and it was unlikely to improve. He walked in, stomped past little hairy Adlon at his desk, trudged past tall but round Orei on the commlink, and pushed past thin and nervous Raam, to his own quiet office.

He flopped behind his desk and yelled for Adlon. 'Get in here. I need to acquaint you with what those scheming Hroth are up to with their little pet Time Lord.'

Adlon walked in. 'Oh? Perhaps we better all hear this.' He shouted for Orei to hang up the commlink and Raam to put his coffee down and join them. Everyone gathered around Brastus's desk.

Brastus steeped his fingers beneath his chin, and began recounting the scene at the Hrothi hut.

Raam stuttered, 'Uh, what exactly does this mean?'

Brastus eyed his junior warily. 'Do I have to spell it out? It means that they are attempting to band together: making friends, rallying supporters to their side, and more. Rnolym springs to mind, he was supposed to be neutral, but I've since found out that he is a personal friend to those Hroth!' He was shaking with outrage.

Adlon shrugged his shoulders. 'Rnolym is easily enough sorted out, Boss...'

Brastus nearly choked. 'You know we cannot be seen to be involved directly, it will weaken my position in the Senate and the increase sympathy for the Hroth!'

'He can be.. dealt with.. with considerable stealth,' replied the jittery Raam.

A smile spread across Orei's long and broad face, and he cracked his knuckles. 'Sure, Boss. I'd enjoy even a little alien-thumping.'

Brastus smiled at his lieutenants; they were catching on. 'Just don't be discovered,

all right? We need clean reputations here for as long as possible.'

'Don't worry. It's all in hand. With any luck, we won't even have to get our hands dirty. Someone else can do that for us,' Adlon replied.

'Just make sure whoever it is doesn't talk. Got that?'

'Yes, Boss,' the lieutenants chorused. They stood, and left the office.

∞

With circuits and less identifiable bits strewn all over the foot of his bed, the Doctor began to examine the damage to the actuator rod. As far as he could tell, it would be his only way off Pella Satyrnis. He turned the capacitor array over and over in his hand, looking for any signs of damage.

∞

'I could really use my glasses right about now...' he muttered to himself.

Laklis was watching, and intuitively knew what he was worrying about. She fetched what remained of his coat and laid it beside his bed.

'Thank you,' the Doctor smiled at her.

Laklis bared her teeth at him. Pfifl especially had noticed his efforts to learn their language and observe their customs as much as his condition allowed him to, and he was growing on her as well, as was the Hroth way. To both of them now, he was as much their son as Tamor had been.

Tamor. Her mind drifted. His death had been so sudden, so violent and so shocking. She sat in her room for months, hardly sleeping or eating, she'd been so traumatised by it. And the perpetrator had never been caught or punished, though she had her suspicions about who had killed him. Her *son*. It was utterly unthinkable that a humanoid inhabitant of Pella would kill a Hroth, and over something as trivial as money. But the way he was found lying… it was horrible. A shiver ran up Laklis' spine at the memory.

'Are you all right?' the Doctor asked as he dipped his hand in the pocket of his jacket. He put his half-glasses on, and looked over the top of them at her.

'Yes, my apologies. Can I help?' Laklis did not want her moment of weakness to affect him.

'Not at the moment. I just need to see this up close, and am a bit short sighted.' He tapped the side of his glasses, and smiled reassuringly at her. 'I'm hoping that I'll have this reassembled shortly.'

She put a paw on his shoulder briefly, and left.

∞

Pfifl joined them for supper, and the Doctor seemed to have worked up a healthy appetite. He sat down at the table, and did his level best to imitate the Hroth customs surrounding food.

'Pfifl, may I ask what you do for a living?'

Laklis answered. 'He is an Ambassador.'

He gaped at the Hroth. 'Really? How interesting.'

"'Most Honourable Hrothi Ambassador to the Humanoid Peoples of Pella Satyrnis" is the official title, if I recall it correctly,' she replied. 'It's been years since it was even used. He's been negotiating Hrothi rights for decades with the other humanoid species of the planet, sharing land, pooling resources for the survival of all of the people of Lberapax, and indeed all of Pella Satyrnis. It doesn't pay especially well, but we like to live within our means, within the confines of Hrothi culture and traditions.'

Pfifl spoke up. 'It isn't that long ago that Brastus seized power, just a few years. Since then, he has been making our lives miserable with his ridiculous laws; taking our land, our resources, our rights.'

'And you fight for your people in the Senate?' The Doctor took a bite of the main dish.

'Yes, I'm a Senator as well as Rnolym, and Brastus and many others. I try to make Hroth needs and desires known, but we are not of prime importance to the Senate. All I usually end up doing is agreeing to their bullying.' Pfifl's muzzle darkened with shame.

'It doesn't have to be that way, you know. You can change it.'

'One person cannot change an entire world.'

'Yes, one person can. Any one person can start, by doing the right thing, to change the world.' He shovelled in another bite. 'Laklis, this is delicious.'

'Thank you.'

∞

The Doctor had nearly reassembled the actuator rod, with some adjustments, by dark. Having the practical use of only one hand made it slow going, and he suspected the capacitor array was the damaged component, but he couldn't be sure without a test run. The rest needed to dry overnight anyway; having been submerged while still powered up would possibly have blown the capacitors. Everything else seemed to be in order.

The Hroth were settling down for the night. Pfifl loped over and sat on the edge of the Doctor's bed.

'Doctor... My mate, you know, well...'

'Yes?'

He cleared his throat, looking as nervous as a dog-faced being might look. 'She says goodnight, son.'

The Doctor smiled, understanding the use of the word as "adoptive son whom we have come to adore". 'Goodnight.'

∞

The Doctor watched Pfifl lope to the other side of the hut and crawl into bed. He watched quietly as they snuggled in, and went to sleep.

His mind drifted as he continued quietly fiddling with the bits of the actuator rod. Sleep was such a waste of time, and yet so many species engaged in hours of it every diurnal cycle, sometimes sleeping half of it away. Sleeping their lives away.

He continued checking the components by candlelight, as his mind mulled over the Hroth situation on Pella Satyrnis.

∞

Two suns shone blisteringly through the windows of the hut as morning broke. A quiet knock at the door, and Raphael entered the stone hut.

He warmed himself at the fire for a while, enjoyed some warm tea made by Laklis, and then approached the Doctor's bed, which was still strewn with bits of actuator rod as he sat tinkering with it.

The Doctor glanced up over his glasses. 'Raphael, nice to see you.'

'Call me Raph. You seem quite chipper this morning.' Raphael looked surprised.

'Chipper? Hmm. Possibly grateful for the daylight so I can see what I'm doing...' Raphael grinned.

'Have you been up all night?'

'I rarely sleep. Besides, I wanted to work on this.' He indicated the mess of bits from the rod.

'Oh. So, how are you feeling?'

'Much improved.' The Doctor took his glasses off and sat them on the bed beside him.

'How are the wounds?' He smiled with satisfaction.

'Healed,' he replied, simply.

'Oh?'

The Doctor held out his unbandaged hand for closer inspection. 'One handed electronic component diagnosis and repair is tedious at best.'

Raphael examined the Doctor's face and hand with considerable interest. 'They're all healed. Completely. Incredible.'

'I'm not Human, nor am I Hrothi, so it stands to reason I might heal at a different rate than they do, hmm?'

'Er, yes.' Raphael blushed, feeling silly. Remembering the message he'd been given earlier before he left the surgery, he changed the subject. 'Rnolym sends his regards. He is pleased at your progress, and will be astonished that your wounds are healed.'

'Oh? His efforts didn't go unappreciated, mind. This seems to be a planet full of Good Samaritans: Rnolym, Pfifl, Laklis...' He paused, thinking aloud. 'And then there's you.'

Raphael looked surprised. 'Me?'

'Yes, but you're an enigma. It doesn't add up. You're quite young, with a sound mind, a sharp wit, and you're here on this frozen planet where Brastus and his cohorts oppress the Hroth on a regular basis? Why here?'

Raphael shrugged. 'It's not all frozen. The town can be quite busy; you should see it some time.' More quietly, he continued. 'Besides, I didn't grow up here, you know. I grew up on Erison.'

The Doctor's eyes widened. 'Erison? Now there's a name I haven't heard in a very long time. Didn't it –'

'End up destroyed by the Sontarans? Yes. I managed to escape aboard a cargo freighter shortly before the Sontarans started their orbital bombardment. I left my family behind. I flitted from planet to planet in the Phylox series, eventually coming here from Andromeda, looking for work. I met Rnolym by chance one day. He remembered the Erisonians' uncanny talent for picking up skills quickly because of our deep dreaming abilities, so he took me in, and I've been working for him ever since. I've no idea what ever happened to my family.'

'I'm sorry.' The Doctor paused, changing the subject. 'You probably won't need to stop in any longer, especially if I get this actuator rod working just now...' He picked up the remaining pieces, popped them back together, and screwed the end back on. It lit up in various places.

Raphael grinned and finished the sentence for him. '...but I probably will, just for curiosity's sake.'

The Doctor grasped the rod. Nothing happened. He rubbed his forehead in thought. He flicked a tiny switch and grasped the rod again. Again, nothing happened. 'Hmm.' He grasped the rod several more times in frustration, but still, nothing happened.

'Besides, you're apparently not going anywhere any time soon, and I want to know more about what you get up to, it all sounds dreadfully exciting.'

The Doctor's attention refocused on Raphael, glaring slightly. 'Exciting indeed. *Young* people.' The Doctor tossed the actuator rod onto the bed and stood, thinking.

Raphael donned his equipment for braving the weather, and grinned at the exasperated Time Lord. 'Yes, *young* people. Good day, Doctor. See you tomorrow.'

∞

Laklis saw Raphael out. Once she closed the door, she picked up some clothes and walked over to the Doctor. 'You'll need these, son.' She held up the clothes she'd finished altering while they talked.

'Laklis, I am honoured.' He grinned widely. 'You made those for me?'

'I altered them to fit you as best as I could judge your form. They may not be perfect, but they will suffice for helping around the hut.'

'It's the thought that counts. Altered... from what?'

'From my son's clothes.'

'Your son?'

Laklis told him about Tamor.

'I had no idea. I am so sorry.' He put a hand on her furry shoulder, and gripped it tightly. 'I will do what I can to help you, and your people.'

'I know.' She nuzzled his chest.

He grinned as he ducked behind a curtained area of the hut, and quickly donned the shapeless brown jumper and the ill-fitting grey trousers. Once dressed, he popped back out, and displayed himself. Not the smartest he'd ever been dressed, but they were paw-made with love, so he would wear them and consider himself fortunate.

Laklis bared her teeth in an approving grin. 'There is much to fill you in on, if you're to take up our cause, and much to do while we talk.' She handed him a broom.

∞

Raam, Adlon, and Orei met Brastus at the office after they received his call.

Brastus smiled at his unlikely lieutenants. 'We've got another problem.'

'Oh?' Adlon smiled, flexing his fingers eagerly.

'Yes. The Doctor, the stranger the Hroth are harbouring. He's a Time Lord.'

'I thought they didn't really exist?' Adlon's mouth fell open.

'Well, it seems they do. And this one is going to cause us some serious trouble.'

Brastus sighed, and wiped his forehead.

'How?' Raam asked with a tremble.

'Because, despite them being utterly mythical, Time Lords are famed for their cruelty. Just look at what they did to the Legions! Who knows what kind of difficulties he could cause here. The wrath of the High Council could come down upon us, and they are swift with their punishments. We could end up frozen in time, forever. Or taken out of time completely. I don't want to give him that chance.'

'Just tell us what you want us to do, and we will.' Orei fidgeted.

'When it is time to act against the Time Lord, we will. First, the Rnolym problem. Any progress?'

'Yeah, Boss. Tonight's the night.' Adlon replied. 'And it will not be traceable to us.'

Brastus grinned, baring a mouthful of white teeth. 'Good work, my boys. Well then, snap to it.'

∞

Pfifl returned to the hut that evening looking and sounding exhausted. Laklis had prepared a meal, and the Doctor joined them, to eat and discuss Pfifl's day.

'It was a nightmare. Arguments broke out all over the Senate. Rnolym tried to stand up for us but its no good. Brastus and his kind have too much power, too much sway. We just weren't heard, not at all.'

The Doctor looked up between bites. 'Is there no way of taking back some of Brastus' power?'

'Not at the moment, sadly there isn't. They just seem to gain more and more each day and they are unstoppable.' Pfifl hung his head, wearing the look of a man beaten.

The Doctor cleared his throat. 'No one is unstoppable. It can be changed.'

Pfifl looked at him as seriously as he had ever done. 'You're forever an optimist, son. Consider how we live – it will sap your optimism away, and then your strength, until all you want to do is quit fighting and give in.'

'Pfifl, you can never quit fighting. Then they win.'

Later, Laklis cleared the table away, and Pfifl remained sitting to talk with the Doctor. Pfifl bared his teeth in a smile. 'Son, you got a lot of work done around here for us today. Much needed repairs. The sink, the electric kettle, we even have video on the commlink again.'

'I suppose I did. It was nothing, really.'

'But it is still appreciated.' Pfifl's ears flapped as he spoke with sincerity.

∞

The Doctor excused himself from the table and went to his corner of the hut. He laid down on his bed, satisfied with the repairs and the information he'd gleaned from the Hroth about their situation.

Thoughts of a thousand dictators throughout time, and memories (and a few fantasies) of toppling those dictators went through his mind. He had a duty to his companions and his TARDIS to get back to the Crystal Bucephalus, but he also felt a moral duty to help the Hroth in their plight.

Something had to be done, he couldn't just stand by and let things continue on as they were. And since he was apparently stuck on Pella any way, he felt justified interfering in local affairs. How he intended to interfere, he wasn't sure yet.

His eyelids began to feel a bit heavy, so he laid back on his head, and before he knew it, he had dropped off to sleep.

∞

He was running. It felt as if he'd been running forever. It was always there in front of him, but never within reach. The actuator rod. His only means of escape, out in front of him like bait wriggling on a hook, waiting for him to bite.

He was naked. Running naked along the corridors of the Bucephalus, most the lights off except for emergency lighting, running through darkness. Legions were chasing closely behind him, huge black furry blobs with several appendages protruding, they tried repeatedly to grab him.

He rounded a corner, and noticed the black and white floor beneath his feet. Like a chessboard. He stopped to hide and the Legions went past him on down the hall.

It was then that he stepped backwards and slipped. The floor ended just behind him, and he was holding onto the edge with both hands in desperation not to fall. He looked down and saw beneath him was total darkness, a chasm of untold depths.

His fingers were slipping; the edge was just too awkward to hold onto. One by one his fingers slid off, until he couldn't hold on any longer. He started to fall.

He screamed as the darkness swallowed him up.

∞

The Doctor sat bolt upright screaming and grasping at the empty air.

Laklis loped over, and sat on the bed next to him. He looked confused.

'Son? Is everything all right?'

The Doctor wiped his sweaty face with a hand. *The hut. Laklis. Pella Satyrnis.* He soon regained his bearings. 'Yes, just a nightmare.' He tried to stop breathing so hard.

She put a paw on his shoulder. 'Dreams happen for a reason. They are your subconscious mind trying to tell you something. Rest on it, and the answers will come with the rising of the suns.'

He considered it for a moment and laid back, his hearts still pounding.

She stroked his forehead with a paw, to calm him. 'Relax. The fear will go, and the truth will be revealed soon enough.'

After having his forehead stroked for a bit, he finally began to relax and felt sleep creeping up on him again.

∞

Raphael stopped in the next morning, very early. The Doctor was still sleeping. Pfifl had gone to the Senate offices, and Laklis was clearing up breakfast dishes.

'I say, this place looks like it's been renovated in one day!'

'The Doctor worked very hard to help me yesterday. He's a good and devoted son.' Laklis beamed with pride, her ears wagging as she talked.

'Is that Raphael?' the Doctor asked, from his bed, interrupting them.

'Yes, I'm here. I've just popped over to see how you were, Laklis let me in.'

The Doctor sat up, rubbed his eyes, and yawned slightly. 'Surprisingly tired from yesterday. On the whole, though, I'm feeling pretty well.' He hesitated. 'Raph, how are you with dreams?'

'Dreams? Something bothering you?'

'It's just this dream I had, I can't understand the meaning. It feels important, though.'

'Well, as my people are dreamers, with much mysticism in our culture based around dreaming, I may be able to help.'

The Doctor settled himself, and began recounting the nightmare. Part of the way through, he rubbed at his temple absently. 'Hmm. What if it wasn't a chessboard as such, but it stood for something else?'

'Well, you're obviously feeling frustrated and possibly vulnerable. Being dumped on a planet out of your control and waking up frostbitten is enough to make anyone feel vulnerable. The frustration part is probably because you can't get that black rod working. As for the chessboard, I'm sure that plays into it, somehow, and is possibly even pivotal, but I've never heard of it in a dream before.'

'Like something divided off into squares or even portions?'

'Aha! It was a Grid.'

'Eh?'

The Doctor paced around, getting more excited, and excitable. 'The actuator rod was out of my reach. I fell off a grid-like floor. It means I'm stranded here because Pella Satyrnis isn't part of the Carte des Locales of the Bucephalus! No one knows where I am, because this planet and time zone aren't visited by the Bucephalus' cubiculos.' The Doctor held his forehead with a hand. 'If Pella Satyrnis isn't part of the Carte de Locales, then the actuator rod will never work, no matter how much I tinker with the components. There's simply no way back that way.' He spoke hurriedly as he thought.

'Oh.' Raphael was still confused.

'This is the 63rd century on a planet the Bucephalus has never heard of or sent a steward to. I was in the 108th century on New Alexandria. Pella Satyrnis isn't part of the Grid, so the rod won't work to get me back. My TARDIS is stuck in 1791 on Earth, so I can't use her either. There must be a way to attract the attention of the Bucephalus stewards, somehow...' he paused. He snapped his fingers. 'Restaurants!

Raphael looked at him askance, unsure where this obsession with food had come from. 'Restaurants?'

The Doctor nodded enthusiastically. 'The Bucephalus was created to cater to the upper echelons of society, and transport them through space and time to the most exclusive restaurants that had ever existed. Tell me, Raphael, are there any world-class restaurants on Pella Satyrnis? Hm?'

Raphael sat back watching the Doctor think, and was amazed at the logical and intuitive leaps that he'd made, but was lost with the entire line of restaurant questioning. 'No, Doctor, Pella is simply a planet of people trying to survive the cold.'

'Then I'll have to build one. Attract enough attention by serving the finest cuisine, and hope that the Bucephalus stewards are sent to investigate it and add it to the Carte de Locales.'

'*Build* a restaurant? Are you insane?'

'Yes, build a restaurant. I can do it. Don't you believe me?'

'I believe you think you can,' he said dubiously, 'but it sounds awfully ambitious for just one person. Who will help you? Where will you get start up capital? Who will work for you?'

'Ah. Well, uh, I have dined at some of the finest restaurants in the Universe, you know... As for capital, that, at least, won't be a problem. I have, to my embarrassment, several overflowing accounts with at least three intergalactic banks. I lose track of the interest, you see. I can travel in space and time; I can never find the time to balance a chequebook. I'll, er, have to hire some cooks, train them up, that sort of thing.'

Raphael still looked unsure.

The Doctor's face lit up. 'Think about it. It would completely upset the balance of power on Pella Satyrnis, if someone other than Brastus and his friends ended up running the biggest enterprise on the planet. What better way to tackle the discrimination that the Hroth are enduring, than to outstrip it, eh? Money makes the world go round, as they say!'

∞

Laklis, who overheard the conversation, smiled inwardly. Helping the Doctor was the best thing they had ever done. He was going to save the Hroth; she felt it in her bones.

Raphael grinned. The Doctor was turning out to be a wily character indeed. 'Well, you'd better make a trip to the local bank, I suppose.'

'Hmm.'

Something on Raphael's hip started bleeping loudly and insistently. 'Its a message from the surgery. I'm needed; I have to go, now. Good luck, Doctor!' Raphael grabbed his gear and dashed out the door.

∞

Donning some bad-weather gear the Hroth had lying about, the Doctor had left the hut, heading towards the local branch of the galactic bank.

Basking in the dual sunlight that shone through the clouds in the dusky pink sky, he trudged onwards through at least two feet of snow. He followed Laklis' instructions implicitly, and found himself in Lberapax town centre after only a few minutes of walking. He had borrowed a spare commlink, just in case he got lost.

The buildings were very old, the roads cobbled, and the streets clean and free of litter or graffiti. Shops were open, windows steamed up from the intense cold outside. It was a clean looking town, with humanoids and Hroth busy going to and from shops along the streets. People looked busy but happy, even with the ground covered in snow. It was like any other town, the Doctor thought.

∞

Raphael stepped into hospital, where the surgery sent him. He introduced himself at reception, and a tall thin nurse in a white uniform led him to the high dependency unit. She pulled back the curtain and led him to a bed.

He couldn't believe his eyes.

It was Rnolym. His feet were hanging off the end of the bed because he was so tall. Face bloodied, nose broken, intubated and on a respirator. Raphael picked up the chart and gave it a cursory glance. The words 'punctured lung', 'broken ribs', and several mentions of fractures in other places caught his attention.

He stepped to the bedside and sat down, taking his boss's, *his friend's,* hand into his.

Rnolym's eyelashes fluttered, and his dark eyes opened.

'It's okay, it's me, Raphael. I'm here.'

Rnolym tried to smile, without much success.

'What happened, Rnolym? Who did this to you?'

He started mouthing a word, but was finding it extremely difficult to talk with the tube down his throat.

Raphael leaned close. He almost could hear the word. 'Once more, please?'

Rnolym finally got it out. 'Adlon.'

∞

Pfifl was surprised to receive a call on the commlink from Raphael. Even more surprising was how shellshocked the young man looked, as if he'd seen a ghost.

'What's wrong, Raphael?'

'It's Rnolym. Someone hurt him. Come to hospital quickly.' Raphael looked overwrought.

'Who did this?'

'He has only said one word – Adlon.'

Pfifl's eyes widened. This was serious, and hitting very close to home. Rnolym was a good friend of the family; if Adlon was somehow involved, it would spell trouble for them all. They'd not long lost Tamor, and now this...

'I will be there momentarily.' He switched the commlink off, and then thought of a call he needed to make prior to telling Laklis and going to hospital to be with Rnolym. The Doctor.

∞

As he trudged along in the snow, something started bleeping in his pocket. It was the commlink. He switched it on, surprised to see Pfifl's face, looking very worried.

'Son?'

'Yes?'

'Be very careful. There may be dangerous enemies out there. I will tell you more later.' The screen clicked off.

The Doctor closed the commlink, and sighed. By the look on Pfifl's face, something bad must've happened; he could just about guess what it was, just not to whom it happened.

∞

Just then he looked up, into the eyes of Brastus standing in front of him. How long he'd been standing there or how much of the conversation he'd heard, he wasn't sure.

'Aah, Doctor "Smith."'

'Just the Doctor, that will do.' The Doctor smiled as politely as he could muster.

'Taking a stroll in the snow, are you?'

'Yes, sight-seeing. Its a lovely planet, you have here. A bit cold, though.'

'Oh really?' He paused, thinking. 'Why do I find "sight-seeing" so difficult to believe? You're a complicated man, Doctor. There's more to you than meets the eye. But be warned. You're being watched, and no one will allow you to mess up the system that has taken so many years to build.'

'The system that oppresses the Hroth, takes their land, their rights as people, oh, you mean that system?' His voice was light, but there was an undercurrent of intense disapproval in his tone.

'The system that keeps them in check and humanoids in power. And it's going to stay that way.' Brastus had leaned in close to the Doctor's face. They were nose to nose.

'How can you be so sure of that? Even Rome fell when the time came...' The Doctor grinned.

Brastus whispered, 'Because you're not going to stop it. More people may end up hurt if you try. Watch your step, Time Lord. You are being watched.' He started walking away, his warning delivered.

'You can be sure I will,' the Doctor replied, under his breath.

∞

Pfifl and Laklis loped in the front doors of the hospital, to find Raphael waiting for them, leaning against the reception desk looking despondent. Laklis put a paw on Raphael's shoulder, her eyes asking the question.

'He's asleep right now. Best to let him rest. We can see him in a little while.'

'Is he going to be all right?' she asked, concerned.

'He will live, yes.' Raphael seemed certain. 'Beyond that, there are no guarantees.'

'Poor Rnolym.' Laklis sighed.

'It was a message; to me, to us, to the Doctor.' Pfifl wrung his paws, his ears flapping abruptly. 'Lets hope the Doctor can change things; that he can stop them – he's our only hope now.' He looked earnestly at his mate, and then at Raphael.

The Doctor talked aloud as he walked along the pavement towards the bank, trying to put the encounter with Brastus out of his mind.

'If I'm going to build a restaurant, it needs a name. *Tempus Fugit.* That's ironic enough; it's the story of my lives. Time flying by, never enough time to get anything accomplished, yet time itself in abundance, with the TARDIS. But she's not here, and I am being forced to take the slow road, to do all the ordinary things I've never done before. Yes, I think that will do nicely.'

He paused. 'Besides, time flies when you're busy, and the Hroth need my help.'

He smiled as he arrived in front of the First Galactic Bank. Feeling slightly nervous, he stepped inside.

Not long after, the Doctor walked out of the bank, and waved goodbye to the doorman. He reached down in his pocket for the commlink.

'Pfifl?' He couldn't help but smile. The success he'd had in the bank would mean a new future for all of them.

'Son? Have you completed your business?' Pfifl looked very upset.

'I have, is something wrong?'

'Come quickly to the hospital. It's straight down the road and around left from the bank.'

'On my way.' The Doctor closed the commlink, and set off through the snow.

∞

The Doctor walked in the hospital, looking around at his surroundings. The hospital itself looked to be quite old. Inside, technologically, it was not much more advanced than Earth around the 22nd century. Still, their level of technology was enough to save his life when it was necessary, he considered.

Laklis padded up to him, and put a paw on his chest. 'Son, I'm glad you came.'

'What happened?'

'It's Rnolym.'

The Doctor looked incredulous. 'How?'

'Come, and talk to Pfifl.' She took his hand, and led him to the high dependency unit. They walked behind a curtain, to see Raphael and Pfifl standing at Rnolym's bedside.

'Ah, son. I'm glad you've come.' Pfifl looked up, very heartbroken.

'How did this happen?'

Raphael spoke up. 'He's managed to implicate Adlon by name. You don't know who he is, Doctor, but he works for Brastus.'

Pieces started fitting together in the Doctor's mind. The warning before he went inside the bank was suddenly a lot clearer to him. This was a dangerous place to be, but if it was ever going to change, he was going to have to out-think Brastus and his minions.

He nodded. 'I bumped into Brastus on the way to the bank. I didn't understand the true meaning of what he said to me until now.'

Pfifl nodded, his ears flapping.

The Doctor continued quietly, 'I've had good fortune at the bank, so it's all set to build the restaurant.' His voice hardened. 'Hopefully I can help stop this madness.'

'That's good news, son.' Laklis looked up at him with pride.

Raphael sucked in a lungful of air. 'I want to help you, Doctor.'

'Don't you have patients to attend to? A job to do?' The Doctor turned to face him.

'Rnolym was the basis of the practice, to be honest, and his faith in me was the only reason I stayed on. There are other junior doctors who will fill in for me.' He looked at Rnolym's sleeping form, and sighed. 'He would want me to help you stop them, whatever your plans.'

The Doctor smiled at him. 'Welcome aboard.'

'We will be there for you, son, whatever you need.' Pfifl bared his teeth in a weak smile.

The Doctor smiled at the Hroth. 'Of course. Thank you.'

He turned to Rnolym, and put a hand on his unconscious shoulder. 'Evil never wins, not in the end. Not with me working against it.' He squeezed the shoulder gently, and turned to leave, steeling himself.

He had work to do.

The Darkest Corner

Adrian Middleton

When we first met, Craig had just written The Crystal Bucephalus*, and was struggling with the synopsis of* Millennial Rites. *It was while talking about our respective fiction that I introduced him to the concept of quantum mnemonics, an idea that had featured in two of my own submissions to Virgin* – The Fugue *(intended as the last sixth Doctor/Rani story), and* The Dark Tide *(a second Doctor/Blackbeard 'histrionical'). Craig championed my Blackbeard story, which got as close to acceptance as I ever managed, and later supported my editorial endeavours in the world of the fanzine.*

Ten years later we were reunited by a Yahoo group, picking up where we had left off, and bouncing crazy, crazy ideas off each other like 1993 was yesterday. I was a reluctant returnee to Doctor Who *fandom, but Craig often egged me on, inspiring me to write my first complete* Doctor Who *novel as a dare. That novel, still in its first draft, was called* Blink of an Eye. *The dare from Craig was a challenge for me to 'out-fanwank' him – to write as good a novel as I could, with more continuity in it than even he had managed.*

I did it, and my last conversation with Craig was an enthusiastic one – he loved the story and wanted to meet up and talk about some of his own ideas of how the second draft might work, and how we might sneak a couple of references in from his own unpublished novel, Time's Champion. *We were planning to get together about two weeks before Christmas 2006 – this turned out to be two weeks after he died, so the meeting never happened, and I'll never know what he had to say to me.*

Now it's my turn to repay some of Craig's friendship. The Darkest Corner *is my unashamedly continuity-laden homage to Craig. Set immediately after* The Crystal Bucephalus*, it throws as many of his favourite concepts together – Kamelion, the Valeyard, the ruins of Gallifrey, the sixth Doctor's great potential, ancient Time Lord history and a gratuitous sequel to a classic Pertwee-Delgado confrontation.*

I happen to think Craig's forte was short story writing, and I hope, in some small way, The Darkest Corner *does him justice.*

Tegan Jovanka ran her hands across the cracked and pitted surface of the control console. Scarred by its exertions in the distant future, the lopsided and fragmented casing that once protected fragile time crystals lay bare and unmoving amid the jury-rigged bundle of wires and bladamite tubes that had bypassed its systems and brought the ship to safety.

The TARDIS was in a sorry state and the Doctor, fretting and picking over bare circuits, didn't look much better.

'Are you sure this thing is safe?' she asked as the Doctor pulled his hand away

from a jumping spark and sucked at his fingertips.

'For now, Tegan,' said the Doctor. He circled the console, placing an arm around her shoulder and guiding her away from danger. 'Now we've set her down, the old girl can get some much deserved rest and recuperation.'

'Rest and recuperation?' Another voice interrupted. It was Turlough. Young, smart, and as cynical as ever. 'From the looks of it, the TARDIS needs major surgery.' He paused for effect. 'A transplant, even.'

Tegan felt the Doctor tense for a moment, before squeezing her arm reassuringly. 'The transplant's already been taken care of, Turlough.'

'What sort of transplant?' he asked.

'You might call it a… a matter transplant. The TARDIS didn't have enough mass to survive another turbulent trip through the Vortex, so I had to bulk her up a little.'

'Bulk her up?' Tegan frowned. 'It's not exactly a chicken, Doctor.'

'That's true,' the Time Lord smiled, 'but the analogy is sound.' It was good to see him relax again, if only for a few moments. 'When we left New Alexandria I locked on to the surface and materialised one of the TARDIS rooms around a few miles of barren landscape. All we need to do now is park up and let her digest it.'

'How does a TARDIS digest a landscape?' Turlough asked. He was obviously in one of his wind-the-Doctor-up moods. 'And won't the people of New Alexandria miss it?'

'Ah,' the Doctor, as usual, deflected the swipe with an enthusiastic explanation. 'It was an abandoned and polluted part of the planet. Devoid of life, and better off being processed by the TARDIS than left to continue damaging the environment.'

'That's handy,' said Tegan, lightening the mood still further. 'Have you ever thought of doing the same to King's Cross?'

'Tegan!' The Doctor looked at her with mock-reproval. 'Remind me to book you on a tour of Camden in 2020, I think you'll find they solve those problems without our help.'

'So,' she played a straight face, 'where are we again?'

'Where we were meant to be all along. The Eye of Orion. One of the most stable places in the galaxy. Good for the mind and body, too.'

'Right, well,' Tegan could see that the Doctor clearly wanted them out of the way while he conducted repairs. 'What do we need to take?'

'That rather depends what you want to do. There are ruins to explore, berries to pick, fields to roam through.'

'Fields? I've always fancied myself as a bit of a van Gogh.'

'Really, Turlough?' The Doctor looked sceptical. 'Well, if you're serious I have some artist materials you can use. I tried painting in my last body, but visiting the likes of

Monet, Toulouse-Lautrec and Picasso was more distraction than inspiration. There was always something more exciting to do. Ah, well.' He fished a key out of his pocket – the key to his study, handing it to Turlough with brief instructions. Pads and canvasses by the easel, brushes in a toolbox, paints in the portmanteau. The Doctor was rarely so free with access to his private quarters. Nyssa had been the last to get that particular honour.

'What about you, Tegan?' he asked after Turlough had left the room.

'What about me? Every time we try to relax we end up chasing each other's tails.'

'Not this time. We've already arrived, and I can guarantee no predators, corrupt governments, invasion forces, salesmen or mad scientists. Even the atmosphere has a feel-good factor. You'll be fine. Have a wander, it's perfectly safe out there.'

'Perfectly safe?' Where had she heard *that* before? 'Eighteenth century France was supposed to be safe, and thirteenth century England before that. Let's face it, Doctor, you haven't got the best track record.'

The Doctor reached across to flick one of the few intact switches on the central console, and the view screen flickered into life, displaying a rolling country view that wouldn't have looked out of place in the Yorkshire Dales. Except for a very faint purple haze in the distance.

'There, look,' he said. 'Grass, hills, serenity.'

'You're absolutely sure?'

'Sure as rain,' he smiled.

'Oh, great. It's going to rain!' she teased, waiting for the Doctor's mouth to drop. Then she grinned. 'I suppose it's safer out there than it is in here. I could get a book from what's left of the library. Do you have any F Scott Fitzgerald?'

'Almost certainly…' the Doctor began.

'Right,' she said, turning on her heels and leaving the room, 'see you in a bit.'

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With Tegan gone, the Doctor turned to his third companion. Sitting in a chair set against the far wall of the control room, Kamelion had stayed silent and unmoving throughout the exchange, watching. Waiting for guidance.

'Do you wish me to escort them outside?' he said at last, picking up on the Doctor's surface thoughts.

'What?' the Doctor looked sadly across at the silver android. 'No. They're fine. That was a stray thought. I can keep them out of the way by moving the rooms around a little.'

Brushing some debris aside, the Doctor reached into the guts of one of the control panels and pulled out a fractured keypad.

'There,' he declared a few moments later, 'that should do it. As for you,' he turned back to Kamelion, 'you're coming with me.'

'Where?' The android stood, tilting his head towards the Doctor. There was a snap as he retracted the umbilical cord that connected him to a junction box set into the TARDIS wall before following him out of the room.

'Somewhere safe.' the Doctor said, turning into a newly-crafted corridor that hadn't been there when Tegan and Turlough had walked past.

'Far from manipulative thoughts.'

Kamelion noted the new architecture as he followed the Doctor. Clean, white corridors much like those he had seen when he first came aboard. Before Lassiter had taken control of him. Before…

'Here we are,' the Doctor announced, pausing in front of a closed door at the end of the corridor. There were no locks or handles, just a solitary roundel set into its white surface. Reaching forwards, the Doctor placed his palm flat against the roundel, and the door glowed faintly before fading away to reveal what lay beyond.

∞

Before them lay a dark, starless vista. Far bigger than any of the rooms Kamelion had seen before, it more closely resembled the surface of a planet that had no sky.

'What is this place, Doctor?'

'I think I'll call it "The Blue Room",' said the Time Lord, stepping over the threshold. 'It's new.'

'New?' Passing through the doorway, Kamelion found himself stepping out from the side of a mountain, looking down upon the scattered remains of an advanced civilisation. There was a broken dome, an impressive rampart, and countless ash-covered spires and minarets in various states of decay.

'New Alexandria, actually,' the Doctor explained at last. 'Well, part of it.'

By Kamelion's estimation – far more accurate than that of a fallible human – the original landscape would have covered eight or ten times the surface area that lay before them.

'This is the landscape you were telling Tegan and Turlough about?'

'Yes, but it's more than just a landscape.'

'It's a city.'

'Not a city,' the Doctor shook his head. 'The City. The Capitol. All that remains

of the Time Lords.'

'I don't understand.' Kamelion was confused. The Capitol was the legendary home of the Time Lords. An impregnable fortress hidden on ancient Gallifrey. Not New Alexandria.

The Doctor set off towards the ruins, picking his way through rocks and debris toward the outer perimeter of the broken dome. He beckoned for Kamelion to follow him, and the android gingerly complied, marvelled by the remnants of ancient designs and at the ruins of a civilisation that had survived, unchanged, for millions of years.

'When we were brought to the Crystal Bucephalus I was pulled out of synch with my home world,' said the Doctor, pulling himself up and over a short wall and onto the intricately carved paving that covered the abandoned city streets. 'My Personal Relative Time and my Gallifreyan Mean Time have been seriously compromised. New Alexandria *is* Gallifrey. It's a part of a future I should never have seen.'

'Why not?' The Doctor had not talked about these things with Kamelion before.

'When a Time Lord travels into his own future, or the future of Gallifrey, he can't go back. The Laws of Time forbid it.'

'Why?' Until now, Kamelion had been satisfied with unquestioning servitude. Rules – like the Laws of Time – were simply rules. The android had never considered asking why, having been freed from the Master, the Doctor couldn't take him home. He just accepted that it was how it was.

'Because once you've seen the future…'

Kamelion understood. 'The present becomes the past.'

'Precisely. Except here, in this future, there are no Laws of Time. The Time Lords appear to have abandoned Gallifrey, and what's left of the old Capitol is in ruins.'

'Is it safe?'

'To you and I,' the Doctor paused to get his bearings, picking out a new path through the weathered streets. 'The entire area is polluted with radical chronons. Whatever happened here destroyed Time Lord civilisation.'

The Doctor was sad. Shocked even. Kamelion could feel thoughts and emotions that the Doctor would not normally have shared with him. He wanted Kamelion to know how he felt. What he was thinking. 'Civilisations rise and fall, Doctor. It is inevitable.'

'Yes, I know. But this is my civilisation, and I've become a witness to its end. That means I've become the last of the Time Lords, forced to roam alone in a universe where my people have been destroyed.'

'Even in the past,' Kamelion added

'Especially in the past. All the other Time Lords would have been synchronised with their home era.' The Doctor reached down, picking something up from amongst the

rubble. Brushing carbon and dust away, he had found a book. A child's book. 'Only those that survived this cataclysm can interact with me now, and I happen to know that these ruins are billions of years old.'

'Then how are they so well preserved?'

'Stasis,' the Doctor explained, letting go of the battered book. It hung, suspended in the air, and in time. Kamelion shied away from the Doctor's thoughts as he pressed onwards again. 'Time is frozen here, except to us. Now I've moved the ruins inside the TARDIS, she can siphon away the pollution, use it to refuel.'

'And the matter?' Kamelion gestured towards the ruined city.

'Block transfer conversion.'

This was a concept Kamelion understood. 'I am a block transfer construct,' he said.

'Which is why you're immune to the stasis. The TARDIS will absorb most of these ruins into her structure, converting them from atomic to non-baryonic matter. Anything she finds indigestible will become a permanent fixture.'

'Indigestible?' Kamelion was uncertain what the Doctor could mean. 'Block transfer can be used to deconstruct any form of matter.'

'Matter yes,' the Doctor nodded, 'but it can't digest Heisenberg radiation or its derivatives, and there are lots of Heisenberg sources on Gallifrey. Especially over there,' he pointed towards the tallest of the city's ruined towers, 'beneath the Panopticon.'

'The Eye of Harmony?' Kamelion had heard of the Time Lords' power source, first in legends on Xeriphas, and later during his travels with the Master.

'Yes,' the Doctor nodded. 'This stasis field is the first line of defence, ensuring that only those already capable of time travel have access to the Eye. Although I never expected it to end up inside the TARDIS.'

'Will it be secure here?'

'Perfectly. The TARDIS shares many of the design features used to fix the Eye at the centre of the Web of Time. When all of this,' he gestured towards the surrounding terrain, 'has been digested, the TARDIS will relocate what it can't convert into energy.'

∞

It took several minutes for them to cross the city, reaching the edge of the vast, statue-circled square that lay at the very heart of the former Capitol. Rising – spiralling – upwards from the centre of the city was the tower they had seen from afar, a twisting helix of dimensionally transcendental architecture that dwarfed any structure Kamelion had ever experienced. In close proximity he could see that the building was much larger than the city that had once contained it.

'So,' he asked, as they paused at the foot of the structure, 'why have you brought me here?'

'I prefer to work with an audience,' the Doctor explained. 'Tegan and Turlough wouldn't have survived the chronon bombardment.'

'So, I am your third choice?'

'Not at all.' The Doctor turned to look at Kamelion. To reassure him. 'I'm… struggling to find situations where you'll be safe. I want to help you, Kamelion. Really, I do.'

'I understand.'

'I hope you do,' the Doctor reached out, holding the android's arms. This act of reassurance, Kamelion realised, was for the Time Lord as much as it was for Kamelion. 'Now, help me to find out what happened here. Let's see if there's anything we can do.'

Do? The Doctor said he had come here to learn before the city was absorbed by the TARDIS. Not to find a way to change history.

'You said that interference was forbidden.'

'It is,' the Doctor pulled away, turning back to look across towards the base of the Panopticon just a short walk away. 'But the alternative… being truly alone. I don't think I could live with that.'

'I understand.' Kamelion repeated. And he *did* understand.

'It must be…' the Doctor realised they had found common ground. He stopped himself. 'How do you cope with being the last of your kind?'

Kamelion lowered his head. It was such a simple question, as was the answer.

'By bonding with my masters,' he replied, taking on a new physical form. 'Embracing their desires.'

In a burst of shining light, the mottled silver automaton was gone, replaced by a moment's fluid shape shifting, with the dark, bearded form of the Doctor's nemesis. The Master. Dressed as Kamelion had last seen him, in his guise as Sir Giles Estram.

'Of course, but I could never do that. Even on Earth I'm an outsider. And no matter how much you trust someone, you can never be certain of their motives. Not even mine.'

'Are you ever certain of your own motives, Doctor?' the Master asked.

'No. No, I'm not. Gallifrey is my home. I wander because… because I can always come home, like the prodigal… oh.'

They had come to within a few yards of the central tower, only to find that something else stood in its place. Another building superimposed over the one they had seen in the distance. The tower had been displaced, and in its place…

'What is that?'

'This is… *was*… the Panopticon, but a new structure's been superposited over the top. The one good thing about the Gallifreyan construction industry – all building and

no demolition. Chances are that the entrance to the old Panopticon will be inside the new building. But why would they build over it?'

From the outside the new building resembled a short Greek temple raised up on a stepped platform. A dozen ionic columns separated the building proper from the rest of the city, and behind the four central columns a large statue could be seen.

'Perhaps it was built after Gallifrey had fallen and the Panopticon was no longer required,' said the Master. 'It looks much more recent, as if it was built after the city was devastated.'

'Perhaps.' The Doctor climbed the steps, drawing parallel with the columns. 'It looks like a museum of some kind, dedicated to someone very special. Don't you think it looks a little like the Lincoln Memorial?'

'Lincoln Memorial?' The Master stared up at the statue that sat before them. It was of a youthful man with tousled curls and sad eyes. 'What is that?'

'I'm sorry, Kamelion. It's an old Earth monument. Even the clothes match,' he gestured towards the Edwardian suit the statue wore. They were typical of Lincoln's period. 'Let's take a look inside shall we?'

Between the statue's legs there was a smooth, square doorway that led into the darkness. Passing into the chamber beyond, they came before a raised plinth inscribed with writing in three languages: Old High Gallifreyan, Ancient Greek, and English. A Rosetta Stone for human-Time Lord communication.

'Ah…'

'What is it?'

'This engraving. The Doctor pointed to the main inscription – the only part that hadn't been translated into English. 'It's my name. *The Doctor, Last Hero of Gallifrey, Bringer of the Nine Deaths*. This…' he waved his arms and circled the chamber, 'is me.'

'You?' The Master turned to read the inscription aloud.

'No, no.' The Doctor closed his hands over his ears and scrunched up his eyes until his companion stopped speaking, 'I shouldn't know about this.'

'So, we leave?'

'No,' the Doctor stood, facing up to his fears. 'We go on. Follow me.'

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Walking past the platform and its inscriptions, they passed into a wide chamber subdivided into alcoves. Each alcove was presided over by a statue, beyond which lay a selection of artefacts, a chronograph player, and a backdrop filled with text. Again, each one was in three languages.

'So,' asked the Kamelion-Master, 'what are these statues?'

'Me… my other selves,' said the Doctor. 'It's like an exhibition of my life. That one – ' he pointed towards the first of the statues. It was a tall gentleman, older and sterner than the one outside, but similarly attired, and with a similar length of hair '– was the first me. The original.'

Looking up into the old man's eyes, Kamelion shifted, adopting the shape of the first Doctor. Where the statue was of dark marble, Kamelion filled in the colours, drawing them from the Doctor's mind.

Tugging at the lapels of his frock coat, the Kamelion-Doctor moved across to the next statue.

'And this?' He became shorter and scruffier as he adopted the second Doctor's shape.

'Number two,' said the Doctor, walking past the chronograph to look at the backdrop that lay beyond. 'And here… a transcript of my trial. Edited by the looks of it.'

Moving on, they came to a third statue.

'This was my punishment…' the Doctor explained. 'My third body. Considering it was forced on me it wasn't too bad. Happy times.'

'Doctor…?' Kamelion had moved on to the next statue, where he soon found himself wrestling with a long and unfamiliar scarf.

'It's all right, Kamelion. This is Doctor number four. My most recent body.' He looked up. It wasn't so long ago that he had been staring at that face in a mirror. It was an odd sensation. 'They could have shown me smiling at least. I was always smiling…'

Behind him, Kamelion grinned a toothy grin as he stood before the next statue. 'This I recognise.'

'Hmm,' the Doctor joined him, looking up at a representation of himself. The hair was a little shorter though – perhaps he was due a trim in the near future. 'I'm not sure I should look any further. Let's…'

Instead of turning away, he looked at the next statue. He flinched. 'Commander Maxil?' The Doctor looked surprised. 'I suppose he doesn't look so bad with the scowl removed.'

Kamelion moved deeper into the alcove, stopping to read through the text on the backdrop. 'He appears to be the most revered of your forms. *"The Doctor that came home, resumed the Presidency, and who steered Gallifrey through hard times like the captain of a ship."*'

'So,' the Doctor turned to join his companion, moving the android's long scarf aside to read the text for himself, 'I'm still President by the time I regenerate. That's interesting to know.'

The Doctor took his time over the display. He seemed quite pleased with what

he found, and his mood had lightened as they moved on to the next incarnation. Pausing to take in his seventh body, the Doctor paused at the chronograph, looking down into the viewer that could instantly relay matrix records directly into the brain at the flick of a switch.

The Doctor flicked the switch. A moment later he recoiled as his brain processed the raw data.

'Oh, dear,' he said.

'What is it?' asked Kamelion, who was shape shifting into a new form. Short and rumpled again, but not quite right. Without a reference from the Doctor's mind the android found it difficult to capture the seventh Doctor's proper form.

'Death's Champion?' the Doctor murmured. 'How could that have happened?'

Standing beside the Doctor, Kamelion leaned over and stared into the viewer. As he did so he adopted the right colours and the right accent for this darkest of the Doctor's forms.

'According to this you made the ultimate sacrifice at the end of your sixth life,' he said in a gentle Scottish burr, 'and that after your regeneration you restored the Rule of Rassilon,' he rolled his r's, 'stepping aside for your granddaughter to rule instead.'

'Yes,' the Doctor seemed distracted. 'Susan…?' The chronograph had shown several images of Susan – *his* Susan. The Doctor's thoughts were of a much younger woman. But, Kamelion noted, although she was many years older there was no sign that she had regenerated.

'She died trying to redeem you. Giving herself to death as a means of nullifying your contract.'

'Contract? What contract? Let me see that again…' the Doctor returned to the viewer, pressing the button and absorbing the record all over again. This time, he didn't pull away until the record had ended. 'I made a contract with Death? This can't be right.'

'What about this?' the Scottish Doctor called over from the last alcove, where he tapped at the final statue with his umbrella. It was the eighth Doctor, his tousled hair and sad face a mirror of the seated giant that rested at the entrance to the memorial.

'My last body?' The Doctor moved to the backdrop, reading aloud. '*"Purged of darkness, he tried and failed to save Gallifrey, but like his predecessor, the home world had become tainted, corrupt. Nine times he tried to save it, and nine times he was forced to sacrifice it"*.'

'It's me. I'm what destroys Gallifrey.' The Doctor backed away from the alcoves, clearly aghast. 'I'm going to be the one responsible.'

'Doctor?' Kamelion was concerned. He could feel the anger and the darkness inside the Time Lord's mind. More than that, he could hear his thoughts, process his intentions, embrace his desires.

And from inside Kamelion's own mind, another voice, a whisper, reinforced the Doctor's thoughts, turning them into a clear set of instructions which the android was compelled to follow.

As the Doctor stood beside him, looking up at the legend of his future, the replica of his seventh body reached across, throwing him backwards and onto his back. Before he could react, his dark facsimile was upon him.

The Doctor found himself pinned to the ground, his throat caught in the vice-like grip of an android. He also found himself staring into the deep, blue eyes of his successor.

'Die, Doctor, die!' Kamelion rasped, pressing his thumbs deep into the soft flesh of the Doctor's throat.

∞

'Kamelion!' The Doctor hissed through gritted teeth. 'Stop this…'

The android paused for a moment. The Doctor's dark thoughts were changing… receding. But as they did so the other voice grew stronger, rising from a subtle whisper into a barked command. *Kill the Doctor, Kamelion. Kill him now.*

His master's voice was strong. Compelling. But the Doctor wanted to live. He was willing his respiratory bypass into action.

'Kamelion,' he gasped, 'I order you to stop!"

Kill him. The voice urged, and Kamelion continued to squeeze.

Stop. The Doctor's voice echoed through his head. His feeble robot mind had become a battleground for two opposing wills, and inside, Kamelion screamed. Staring down into the Doctor's eyes, he caught a glimpse of his own reflection. His present form. He wasn't the seventh Doctor any longer, he was the Master again.

The Master's voice receded. Metal hands unclenched as the android resumed his natural shape.

'You… wanted to kill yourself, Doctor. You willed me to do it.'

The Doctor gulped in air, perching himself up as he rubbed his rapidly bruising throat.

'That isn't what I was thinking.' he said hoarsely. 'Not me as I am now. I was thinking of my future. It needs to be changed.'

Confused, Kamelion helped the Doctor to his feet. 'I do not understand.'

Dusting down his beige coat, the Doctor patted Kamelion's shoulder reassuringly, but the android knew he had done wrong.

'What should I do?'

'Nothing,' the Doctor said, crossing over to the platform at the front of the exhibition. It was about ten feet square and equally high. 'No, wait, come over here.'

Kamelion joined the Doctor, who gestured for him to grip the side of the platform.

'If this is based on the Lincoln Memorial, then there should be something that I need underneath here. Do you think you can move it?

'Not in this form,' Kamelion said, changing shape and gaining height and mass.

Towering above the stone platform there now stood a creature of myth. A green troll or ogre in tattered purple pants stood in his place, some ten feet high and almost the same across. Digging its blunt fingertips into the cracking, splintering stone, it slowly heaved the mass aside. Beneath the platform was a small recess just large enough for a man to jump into.

The Doctor jumped.

'What are you doing?' Kamelion asked in a gruff, hulkish voice.

Bending down, the Doctor hefted up a small casket, about three feet by two. Sliding it onto the floor and across to his companion.

'Here,' he said, 'open this.'

'What is that?' The casket was made of rough stone and bore the seal of Rassilon, legendary founder of the Time Lords. 'Your remains?'

'No. They don't bury Time Lords. They absorb our bodies back into the looms and recycle us. At least they used to.'

Kamelion reached down, pushing hard against the sides of the box until it popped in a cloud of dust. Taking over, the Doctor separated the broken casket and reached inside, drawing out a slender tube some twelve inches in length. It seemed to contain a swirling plasma or liquid. Kamelion couldn't quite work out what it was, but whatever the tube contained was constantly shifting and swirling under its own power.

'What are you planning to do with that?'

'I'm going to do what I was thinking about when you tried to kill me. I'm going to change my personal history.'

Hoisting himself out of the recess, the Doctor beckoned Kamelion to follow as he half-walked, half-ran outside the Memorial and across the square beyond.

It took what felt like several minutes to retrace their path through the city and across the landscape that the Doctor had christened "The Blue Room". Stepping back into the TARDIS corridor, the Doctor led Kamelion – who was again in his familiar silver form – back to the console room.

It was white again, and much of the console had repaired itself, with a gleaming time rotor ready to respond to the flick of a switch. But not the one the Doctor now depressed.

A door swished across the entrance to the corridor and a lock clicked somewhere.

'What are we doing, Doctor? What about Tegan and Turlough?'

'Don't worry. Thanks to the stasis field we've only been gone a couple of minutes.'

Kamelion looked towards the locked corridor door. It seemed that the Doctor still wanted to be alone.

'Just a precaution,' the Doctor explained, 'I moved those rooms a very long way away. Now, there are some things I'll need you to do.'

The Doctor leaned forwards, reaching for Kamelion's umbilical. Drawing some slack, he plugged it into the TARDIS databank before typing furiously into the keypad. As he did so, Kamelion cocked his head, trying to see what instructions the Doctor was giving him. When that failed he tried to sense the Doctor's thoughts, but this time they were closed to him.

Moving over to the console's navigational panel, the Time Lord began inputting codes and calculating vectors with blinding speed.

'Are we leaving?' Kamelion asked.

'No need,' the Doctor shook his head. 'I'm setting up an interstitial motive bridge into the past. The TARDIS will stay in the same time and place, but the real-world interface I'm creating at the end of the bridge will emerge at a completely different location. I'm drawing down as much mass from the Blue Room as I can, mapping a physical tunnel onto the vortex.'

As the Doctor spoke, an archway appeared in one of the walls. It led into a narrow corridor which ended with a simple door.

'It's forbidden of course,' the Doctor explained, 'but right now I'm the Highest Authority. So, as custodian of the Laws of Time, I hereby authorise myself to use any and every means possible blah, blah, and so on, and so forth.'

Flicking a final switch, the Doctor dashed out of the room, passing under the arch and closing the short distance towards the door.

'Come on, Kamelion,' he called, 'Tegan and Turlough won't even notice we've been gone.'

Intrigued, the android made his way towards the Doctor. 'Where are we going?'

'Prison.'

The Doctor opened the door, stepping out into a small brick cell. Following him inside, Kamelion noted the cramped conditions. A small window, a single door, a simple toilet and a bed.

'You're imprisoning yourself to prevent you from causing future harm? Will I share your solitude?'

'Of course not,' the Doctor reassured him, 'this is Stangmoor Prison. I came here for something. Tell me, do you sense the Master?'

'The Master? I don't…' Kamelion opened his mind, searching for a powerful contact. But there was nothing. Other than the Doctor's the minds were weak here. 'No, he is not here.'

'Excellent! He should be busying himself in China at the moment. Now the next part is very important. I want you to look into my mind. I'm going to focus on an image, and I want you to assume that form. Can you do that?'

Kamelion nodded, concentrating on the Doctor's thoughts. The Time Lord was remembering a man. Shorter than the Doctor. Familiar. *The Master*. Not Kamelion's Master though, but another, earlier, incarnation.

'That's perfect,' the Doctor commented, taking in the dark, grey-flecked hair and beard, the Nehru suit, and the satanic features. Reaching forwards, he checked the details on the security pass that Kamelion had fabricated. 'Now, if anybody asks, you are Professor Emil Keller, and you're here to see Professor Kettering. I'm your assistant, and we're here to add a new component to the Keller Processor.'

Drawing a lump of scrap circuitry from one of his pockets, the Doctor pressed it into Kamelion's black-gloved hands. 'I want you to say whatever comes into my head.'

Pulling open the cell door, the Doctor glanced up and down the corridor before giving his companion the all-clear. Together they made their way, unchallenged, towards the prison's medical wing, where the Doctor quickly located a door labelled "Processing Room".

'This is it,' he whispered, gently easing the door open. 'Hello?'

∞

It was a well-lit laboratory, with several pale formica tables set against black-boarded walls. At the far end of the room was a desk, at the end of which was a chair equipped with restraints, much like an executioner's chair. To its left was a trolley, on which a large, complex device rested.

'Hello?' A middle-aged scientist in a white lab-coat was sitting at the desk. 'Oh,' it looked like he had been completing a set of notes before he looked up from his work, 'Professor Keller. This is most unexpected, I heard you were away.'

Rising to greet Kamelion and the Doctor, the scientist brushed against his notes, knocking them to the floor. Flustered, he hastily began gathering the papers together.

'Professor Kettering?' Kamelion said, testing out his new identity. 'I was, but certain matters came to my attention. I had to leave my assistant, Chen Li, behind. This,'

he paused to introduce the Doctor, 'is…'

'Seamoth, Trent Seamoth.' For some reason, the Doctor was smirking. Helping Kettering to retrieve his papers, he offered a hand, shaking it vigorously. 'I've heard so much about you, Professor.'

'Oh, yes. I must have missed the call from security.'

'Nothing to worry about,' said Kamelion-Keller, 'I just wanted to show Seamoth here how to recalibrate my machine.' He held up the scrap of circuitry that the Doctor had passed to him. 'We need to upgrade the analog limiter.'

'Of course, of course.' Kettering held out his hand to take the circuit. 'May I…?'

'Er… I'm so sorry, Professor Kettering,' said the Doctor, pushing the gathered papers back into the Professor's hands, 'but we're on a tight schedule. Do you have the spectrographic log?'

'Yes, yes,' Kettering looked around, trying to spot the requested paperwork before realising it was elsewhere. 'It's in my office.'

'Do be so kind as to fetch it for us then, Professor,' said Keller.

'There's a good fellow.'

'Certainly. I'll get them right away.'

Kettering excused himself, heading out of the room and towards his office.

'Good work, Kamelion,' said the Doctor, patting his shoulder. 'That should give us four or five minutes, but we should be done in three.'

Crossing over to the trolley at the far end of the room, the Doctor started to familiarise himself with its design.

'What is it?' Kamelion asked.

'It's called the Keller Machine.' The Doctor explained, running his eyes and fingers over the device. 'It's being touted as a revolutionary new way of treating psychotic criminals. There's a mind parasite inside that literally sucks the evil out of a man's brain.'

'And in reality?'

'It's based on a device from Gallifrey's Dark Times. When the Time Lords were first created they were susceptible to madness. Their brains couldn't cope with the stress of long life. If a Time Lord stayed in the same body for more than a thousand years he'd start to go mad. That's why we change our bodies when we regenerate. It renews the synapses and releases all that pent-up paradox, which the TARDIS absorbs and diverts back into its engines.'

'So what is this machine for?'

'Well, before the new body idea they came up with this. It's a siphon. The parasite is a psychic leech bred to suck up all the dark thoughts and emotions hidden in the darkest corners of our minds. When we mastered regeneration the madness was delayed by up to

ten thousand years. The leeches were all but redundant, and eventually became extinct, so goodness knows where the Master found it.'

'And the machine?'

'The processor amplifies the parasite's power and allows the dark thoughts to be re-focused. Broadcast. He can do to many what you've already felt him do to you.'

'I see,' Kamelion watched uncomfortably as the Doctor pulled on a pair of rubber gloves and picked up a set of tongs from a nearby bench. 'If this parasite is so powerful why didn't I sense it? Am I safe?'

'When it's not attached to the processor the parasite's a touch telepath, and you can't sense it because it hasn't absorbed any minds yet. The Master won't be testing it out for… oh… another week. More than enough time for me to steal the parasite and for him to find a new one.'

Moving over to the Keller Machine, the Doctor slid open a metal panel and reached inside. Finding a large jar of some kind, he gently unscrewed it, withdrawing an open container from the guts of the machine. Inside, Kamelion could see a slick, black, slug-like creature. Pulling out a plastic bag, he lowered the tongs into the jar and gripped the parasite. It squirmed as the Doctor dropped it into the bag and tied it off.

'Now,' said the Doctor, slipping the parasite into one of his pockets, 'let's get out of here.'

∞

The last time Tegan was in the library it had, quite literally, been falling about around her ears. The TARDIS had been in its death throes. The stakes were high, and the situation was grim. Now, after a longer than usual journey through the TARDIS corridors, she stepped into a shifting scene.

The first thing she noticed was that there were no books. The bare walls had repaired themselves, and row upon row of half-formed bookcases appeared to be materializing, much as the TARDIS did when it landed in a new location.

The empty white shelves seemed to be assuming the shape of a single spiral, like the inside of a conch-shell. Uncertain if it was safe to cross the threshold, she stepped into the room, stamping on the floor to make sure it was solid.

Crossing over to the nearest shelf, Tegan put her arm into the cavity and waved it about. Definitely no books. *Typical.*

As she huffed and cussed, Tegan noticed a change. She got goose bumps as the air seemed to charge itself, and her hair stood on end. Before her eyes the white, ghostly outlines of a shelf full of books started to appear.

As she watched, the washed-out images solidified, their spines filled with colour and their embossed titles became legible. She reached up randomly, pulling out a book and hefting it about. It was a big volume of maybe a thousand pages, but it was as light as a slice of polystyrene. *Was* being the operative word.

As she held the book its mass increased, forcing her to grip it with two hands before slumping to rest it against her chest.

'Rabbits,' she cursed, struggling to ease the book back up into the right shelf-space. 'Transdi-bloody-mensional physics. Gah!'

With the book back in place, Tegan looked to where the spiralling shelves turned a corner. They were all now crammed full of books, meticulously ordered in a way that only the TARDIS databank might manage. Moments later she could smell them. Not dust – the library was spotless – but the different smells of paper and string and ink and glue. Fresh smells.

'Right,' she started to walk down the curving aisle, picking out the nearest titles, all began with Zz-. 'F,' she muttered. She had a fair walk ahead of her.

∞

Elsewhere inside the TARDIS, the Doctor closed off the archway that led back to Stangmoor Prison. With a flick of a switch he jettisoned the bridge into the vortex and unlocked the doors. He also reset the length of the corridors that led to his private quarters and to the library.

'Tegan and Turlough should be back any moment,' he said, handing the plastic bag to Kamelion. 'I want you to take this to my laboratory. I'll join you in a minute or two.'

The silver robot nodded, delicately taking the bag and carrying it out of the console room at arms length. As he did so, Turlough passed him in the doorway. He had a blank canvass and a set of charcoal pencils under his arm.

'What's up with him?' he asked as the android disappeared down the corridor.

'Oh, Kamelion offered to dispose of some melted circuits,' the Doctor explained, pulling a duster from his pocket and dabbing at the shiny new surface of the power systems panel.

Turlough whistled. 'Didn't take you long to get the TARDIS fixed,' he said, taking in the features of the new room.

'Oh, once the desktop wallpaper's been selected she does most of the work herself,' the Doctor explained. 'There are still a few tweaks I have to make. You go on ahead and I'll catch you up.'

'Where's Tegan?'

'She's gone to get a book. If you see her first, tell her I'll be along shortly.'

And with that, the Doctor slipped out of the control room.

∞

Tegan ran her fingers over the dust-jacket of her newly discovered book. The ghostly yellow eyes and deep red lips of Daisy Buchanan were superimposed over a night-time city scene, with bright bursts of yellow light breaking through the darkness. *The Great Gatsby. F. Scott Fitzgerald.* She opened the book and read the name of the publisher on the dust jacket. *Charles Scribners' Sons.* Trust the TARDIS to stock up with a first edition. Aunt Vanessa would have been so jealous.

Clasping the book to her chest, Tegan dashed out of the library. Now she had a decent read she was keen to join the Doctor and Turlough. See if this planet really was as relaxing as the Doctor had made out. As she scurried along the corridor, Tegan briefly spotted Kamelion some way ahead. He was at a t-junction, heading away from the control room. And he was walking suspiciously, holding a package in front of him and at arm's length. The way her ex-flatmate Allie had used to carry a stinky nappy. On a whim, and because she'd never really felt comfortable about the android, Tegan decided to follow him.

The android didn't get very far before he entered one of the TARDIS laboratories. Uncertain of how good his senses were, Tegan sneaked up to the open door, sidling up to the edge so that she could peek inside. Kamelion was preoccupied. He had placed the strange bag down in the middle of a table, disappearing from sight for a few moments. Drawing back, Tegan was surprised to see the bag move. She gasped.

Returning to the bag, Kamelion tore it open and deposited its contents into a large, broad dish. A thick, dark blob landed into the dish, quivering like jelly. To Tegan it resembled a giant sea anemone. As the android continued his mysterious preparations, his back moved to obscure her view. Stretching up onto her toes, Tegan strained for a better look when –

'Ahem.'

She gasped.

Standing behind her, the Doctor had a quizzical expression on his face as she dropped her book with a thud.

'You scared the living daylights out of me,' she whispered.

'What are you doing, Tegan,' he asked, 'and why are we whispering?'

'Shh,' she pointed into the laboratory, 'it's Kamelion. He's up to something.'

The Doctor glanced over Tegan's shoulder, where he could clearly see Kamelion following his instructions, wiring up an old exitonic circuit board to a passive mind probe.

'Ah. I'm afraid he's helping me tie up a couple of loose ends from our visit to the Crystal Bucephalus.'

'Loose ends?' she said loudly, sighing with relief. 'Fixing the TARDIS you mean?'

'Amongst other things. I didn't want to bother you and Turlough. You both need a rest.'

'So what are the other things? And what's that sludgy thing Kamelion's got? Looks like bad sushi.'

'More like bad karma, I'm afraid, Tegan.' The Doctor ushered her into the room, where Kamelion turned towards them, the usual blank expression on his face.

'Is everything alright, Doctor?' he asked.

'Yes, Kamelion. It's fine.' He glanced across at the dish. 'It looks like the parasite's out of the bag.'

'Parasite?' Tegan remained confused.

'That,' the Doctor pointed to the thing in the dish. 'Mind parasite. Perfectly safe so long as you keep your fingers to yourself. Here,' he held out a slender tube, 'hold this.'

'What is it?' Tegan took the proffered object. It was quite long and slim, and she was surprised she hadn't noticed the Doctor holding it. Then again, he had had one arm behind his back.

'My biodata.' Tegan remained unenlightened. 'You know I have multiple bodies?' She nodded. 'Well, that's because I have thirteen sets of genetic and experiential information coded into my body. This…' he tapped the tube she was holding, 'is an extract. The Time Lords keep a copy connected to the Matrix for as long as I'm alive. It's their way of being one step ahead. They use it to predict what we will do in the future.'

'That's terrible…' Tegan began, 'but, hang on. You're still alive. So how…'

'It's from my future. I recently found out that when I get older I'm going to make some bad choices.'

That sounds ominous, she thought. 'What sort of bad choices?'

'Mistakes. As we get older, Time Lords become prone to madness. Usually around the tenth body, although if you're overexposed to the forces of paradox it can strike much sooner.'

Tegan responded with her finest blank look. She suspected this was just one of those loose ends that were way over her head, but the Doctor carried on anyway.

'I found out that the madness will strike me a little earlier, and that I'm destined to destroy Gallifrey.'

Gallifrey? She recalled that that was the name of the Doctor's home planet.

'Crikey. That's serious.'

'Very,' the Doctor agreed. 'Kamelion here's going to help me stop the madness.'

'With the sushi?'

'That's right. I'm going to use it to siphon off my darkest thoughts. If I do it now the madness will be delayed by a few lives. Instead of my seventh self going crazy, he'll be able to resist the corruption and make the right choices. And that should be enough to keep my future selves out of trouble.'

'And these dark thoughts of yours?' Tegan kind of understood. 'The parasite eats them?'

Again the Doctor nodded. 'Any thoughts the parasite consumes become its own. An evil, twisted version of my mind. The antithesis of everything I stand for.'

'Right. So it soaks up all your bad vibes, and then we squish it?'

'No. Squishing it,' he used the expression distastefully, 'would be wrong. The parasite is a blank slate at the moment, but once it absorbs my thoughts it becomes a part of me. I need to put that part back inside my head where it can do no harm.'

'Hang on. You're taking it out and putting it back again? What's the point?'

'The Doctor is moving it, Tegan,' said Kamelion, keen to play a part in the exchange.

'Things that happen in a hundred years will be delayed by a thousand. Instead of the seventh Doctor doing bad things, it will be the last Doctor who goes mad. The twelfth.'

'Or thirteenth,' the Doctor corrected him, 'it's not an exact science.'

'But you'll still be a bad guy in the future? Is that how the Master ended up… you know?' She twirled her finger in the air. 'I mean, what kind of life is that to look forward to?'

'I don't think it will come to that, Tegan,' he took the biodata extract from her, passing it to Kamelion, who starting wiring it up to the exitonic circuit board. 'There's a good chance that I won't live beyond my eighth life. Something big will happen then. I'll die before my dark side ever surfaces.'

'Oh, right,' she felt awkward, not knowing what to say. *He's talking hundred of years from now, not tomorrow.* 'That's good to know.'

'No, it isn't. Kamelion has to make the changes, and when he's done I won't remember a thing. The truth will be buried.'

'But I'll know.' The news hurt Tegan. Typical of the Doctor to try and shove the really important stuff under the carpet when her back was turned. 'One question. How can you trust Kamelion but not me? I mean, Turlough I can understand, but…'

'I didn't want you or Turlough involved. What you didn't know couldn't have hurt you. But now that you do…'

'What?' Angry Tegan had something to say. 'You'll wipe my memories?'

'Not exactly,' the Doctor looked hurt. 'I was going to say you can help. Rewriting biodata is a delicate process. Not like brain surgery. Every experience I've ever had, every memory, and every person I've ever met, is part of what's about to be changed. Whatever memories I lose, you'll lose too.'

'So you are going to wipe my memories!'

'Time will do that for us. History heals itself all the time. That's nature, not me.'

'So I'll forget all this?'

The Doctor shrugged. 'It depends how successful we are. Only Kamelion and the TARDIS will know everything that happens. And I trust the TARDIS implicitly.'

'Okay,' she reminded herself it was the Doctor who was in most danger from all of this, not her feelings. 'So what do you want me to do?'

'Well,' the Doctor moved over to inspect the silver android's handiwork. 'Kamelion's completed the circuit between the parasite and the biodata extract.' He prodded at the circuit board with a small tester, which winked green in response to his prods. 'All I need is for you to hold my hand and close your eyes.

'Yeah, right,' she said, taking his hand. 'A delicate process. Not like brain surgery at all.'

Smiling reassuringly at Tegan, the Doctor poked his finger into the top of the mind parasite.

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The Doctor and his companions were gone. Off on another adventure, leaving Kamelion behind to contemplate his existence.

At least, he thought, *this time I have a function.*

The Doctor's timeline was synchronised and the TARDIS repaired. Tegan and the Doctor had left happy and oblivious to the secrets they had left in his safe keeping. Only he, Kamelion, and the TARDIS, now knew about the Blue Room. Against all the odds the Doctor had given him another chance.

From his vantage point at the foot of the ruined Panopticon, the android stared across the landscape. Its sharper features had already started to blur as the TARDIS siphoned away the bluffs and crags that surrounded the old Capitol. Elsewhere in the TARDIS, power reserves were rising and new rooms were being formed.

He turned, stepping back into the ghostly monument. In his hand, he carried the

Doctor's biodata extract. Rewritten. Refreshed.

In front of him stood the platform he had moved aside during his last visit. Unlike the outside, the interior of the Memorial was as sharply defined as he remembered. The deep finger marks and splintered stone hadn't smoothed like the ruins outside.

Perhaps, Kamelion thought, *there's a lot of Heisenberg radiation here, and this place will never be displaced. Or perhaps the TARDIS is absorbing matter from the edges, working its way in.*

Whatever the answer, he circled the platform and found the broken box that had, until recently, been buried underneath. Placing the slender tube to one side, Kamelion picked up the box, split asunder by the brute strength of his previous form. This time, he concentrated, establishing a psychic link with the TARDIS.

Contact.

Kamelion started to glow with the shining aura that presaged his transformations. This time, however, it wasn't Kamelion whose shape shifted. It was the box. Through Kamelion, the TARDIS was repairing it. Momentarily, the intact box clicked open, and the android set it down upon the ground, lifting the lid and staring at what lay inside. A bed of exitonic circuitry surrounded the tube-shaped cavity.

Kamelion picked up the extract and returned it to its rightful place, completing whatever circuit sat inside the box. As he closed the lid and set it back beneath the platform, the exhibition flooded with white light. Shielding his eyes, Kamelion turned towards the alcoves to see what changes had been wrought.

At a glance he could see few changes to the first five exhibits. Each Doctor resembled what he had seen before. The sixth and seventh Doctor looked similar, but there were subtle differences – different clothes, different backdrop texts.

As the Doctor had requested, Kamelion stared into the seventh chronographic viewer and watched.

If Susan is still in danger, you know what to do. They were the Doctor's orders, input directly into his artificial brain. *If not, forget what you have seen.*

The android processed what he saw, and then moved on. He turned towards the statue of the eighth Doctor. It was the same. Whatever changes had been made to the sixth and seventh Doctors' lives, it had had little impact on the life of the last Doctor.

Except that he wasn't the last.

There were more alcoves, set aside for the ninth, tenth, and future doctors. He turned to examine them, but stopped. *Don't look beyond my seventh life. Not this time. Return the extract and leave. Don't look back.*

Kamelion obeyed, returning from whence he came. Somewhere in the darkness, between the twelfth and thirteenth alcoves, he thought he could hear dark laughter.

Fair Exchange

Mike Morgan

Craig's writing was filled with great ideas. Sometimes the stories he wrote burst at the seams from the accumulated pressure of all those ideas, but none of us would have had it any other way. The gushing forth of his creativity was the result of sheer enthusiasm; he loved what he was doing and it showed in every paragraph.

Sometimes his editors were unresponsive to his floods of imagination, but Craig always responded with good-natured reworkings of his material to accomodate their 'suggestions'. The gestation period of The Crystal Bucket *(I mean* Bucephalus*) was one such example of this process of give-and-take. In his original outline, Craig had a race of telepathic alien dolphins called the Amentethys as the villains lurking behind the scenes. But they were lost in the rewrites, never quite making it into that or any subsequent work. I thought that editorial decision was a crying shame, because I agreed with Craig: they were a good idea and deserved to be in a* Doctor Who *story. So here they are, hopefully close enough in spirit to how Craig would have wanted them.*

But Craig's ideas often revolved around making the universe of DW more interconnected, as I'm sure others will have pointed out in this collection. So, how could I write a story in honour of 'Craggles' without inserting some gratuitous piece of continuity? And how better to do so than by making this a partial sequel to one of his short stories? As a result you not only get the Amentethys, but the Lorq and the Savant too (both from the story Zeitgeist *in* Decalog 3 *– if you haven't read it, you should hunt down a copy and do so right away). The origin of the Savant is my fault, I admit my guilt right here, I wanted to know how and why he came about and so I made up a history for him. But in the infinite vistas of alternate histories that stretch out before us, I'm sure there's space enough for us all to imagine our individual versions of that terrible chain of events: for the spectre of the Doctor-as-evil-personified is one that will always prove intriguing and worthy of exploration.*

Here's to Craig – he was an inspiration to us all. I am eternally grateful for having had this chance to play with the characters he invented, and by so doing, perhaps excite interest in his original tales, without which none of this would have been possible.

The Doctor could feel the coarse fibres of the noose about his throat; the hemp scratched terribly, reddening the skin on his neck, but no matter how much he wanted to pull at the noose he couldn't – his hands were bound tightly behind his back, far too expertly tied to slip out of, even taking into account his extensive skills at escapology. He was forced to use his chin to try and shift the irritating rope an iota, even that small movement providing

a moment of blessed relief. The slack coils of the rope hung heavily on his shoulder, not yet tightened as the redcoat attached the other end of the hemp to the hastily constructed wooden frame from which they would all soon dangle. The Doctor could smell the heather and gorse of the rolling hills, the fresh aromas carried on a brisk wind that whipped at his thick mop of black hair, blowing strands into his eyes: he was thankful for the insulating material of his frock coat – at least he wasn't going to catch a chill. Given the circumstances, he was happy to take comfort in whatever small victories came his way.

He tried to smile reassuringly at Ben, similarly tied to a waiting noose next to him; he tried to convey with expression alone that something was bound to turn up, that they'd soon get out of this just as they'd eluded death so many times before, but the sailor wouldn't meet his gaze. No doubt the poor lad was worried about Polly, still out there on the heath somewhere with the Laird's daughter, Kirsty, fortunate to be far from this horror, safely taken out of harm's way by the domestic chore of fetching water. How he hoped she wouldn't doom herself by trying to rescue them, and how he secretly wished she would – because, right now, outside intervention seemed to be their only chance of salvation.

The four of them were lined up on the rough-and-ready scaffold, counting the seconds down until the soldiers finished their preparations and could pull the ropes taut, kicking away the rickety support from under their feet; the Doctor could almost feel the rope tugging at his jaw, stretching his spine, crushing his windpipe to a bloody mess. The other redcoats, part of the Duke of Cumberland's army under the command of the odious Lieutenant Algernon Ffinch, were keeping a careful watch on them, rifles at the ready. There was no possibility of escape there. Who could have anticipated arriving in the Scotland of April 1746 would have proven so inhospitable? Trust the TARDIS to deposit them in the immediate aftermath of the bloodiest battle of the Jacobite rebellion: Culloden.

Next to Ben stood a young piper called Jamie – they'd only just met him and already the poor, beaten Highlander had lost his friend Alexander to the tender mercies of the redcoats; ah – if only Ben hadn't fumbled setting down the gun upon the cottage's table, if only the aged weapon hadn't accidentally discharged, then the passing English troops would never have heard the shockingly loud report, would never have been attracted to the unremarkable Scottish farmhouse and wouldn't have burst in on them all. How delighted Ffinch had been to discover the rebels hidden away inside, and how brave Alexander had been to rush them – but it had been a futile and short-lived sort of valour, ending in his body lying still and bleeding on the cottage's dirt-packed floor, his lifeblood spilling out from two mortal gunshot wounds. Jamie still seemed traumatised by the loss of his friend, mere minutes earlier.

Ffinch hadn't lost any time in ordering their executions, and he certainly hadn't wanted to listen to any protestations of innocence from the Doctor or Ben, bystanders

coincidentally caught up in the fleeing Highlanders' plans. Using wood chopped into useful lengths by the farmhouse's former owner, now presumably a victim of the fighting, the troops had set about constructing the framework just outside the plain cottage, most of their work in preparing the materials already done; the speed of their work entirely too fast for the Doctor's liking. If there was any justice in the universe, thought the Doctor, then an act as vile as deliberate murder should take longer than this. It shouldn't be rushed so, like an unpleasant but necessary chore; it shouldn't be hurried through as if the perpetrators wanted to get it over and done with as quickly as possible, just so they could get on with something more diverting. The redcoats were behaving as if stringing up four men was nothing more important or troublesome than darning a sock, or polishing some buttons – where was the statesmanlike carrying out of sombre duty one expected at times like this? This really wasn't the way the Doctor had anticipated his peripatetic existence would come to an end.

Almost hopping up and down with pent-up frustration, the Doctor railed inwardly at how easily all this fuss and bother could have been avoided. The TARDIS had materialized in a glen not far from the cottage and seeking desperately to avoid cannon-fire from the nearby pitched battle between redcoats and Scots, their group had sought cover, soon running into the untrusting Alexander. The boy had assumed they were English spies, not an unreasonable assumption given the Doctor's friends' accents, and had taken them back to the cottage for interrogation. Once there, they'd found Jamie, Kirsty and her father, the Laird, hiding out from the English troops sweeping through the region. The usual rigmarole of misunderstandings and disbelief had ensued, ending up with Ben somehow managing to threaten their captors with a gun he'd found earlier. Naturally, the Doctor had calmed down the situation, soothing everyone's troubled brows – and after promising to administer medical aid to the injured Laird in return for their release – he'd persuaded the quick-tempered Royal Navy tar to put down the blessed gun. Only it had promptly gone off, which had started the whole rapid chain of events that had led to them standing here on this creaking scaffold, with the long ropes dangling so heavily on their shoulders. Thankfully neither of the women had been in the building during this spectacular debacle, which was some small comfort at least.

The Laird made up the fourth member of their unhappy little band of prisoners awaiting execution, but he was grey-faced, barely conscious; still facing death from the wounds he'd suffered on the battlefield. Rather than chafing at the scratchy cord slung around his neck, the man seemed more intent on keeping his overcoat fastened, as if determined to keep whatever lay beneath hidden. The Doctor suspected there was more going on here than met the eye – he hoped he'd get the chance to discover what it was!

But that hope seemed faint indeed, for the soldiers were ready now, and with

nothing more than a tersely barked word of command, the pinched-featured peacock that was Ffinch ordered their deaths – but wait, wait – that wasn't right: events were moving far too quickly, and in entirely the wrong direction.

Time seemed to slow to the Doctor, the following moments of sickening horror unfolding with treacle-like sluggishness; the Doctor was forced to watch, his head held in place by the tightening noose, as the two girls dashed over the nearby ridge, yelling and screaming. As gravity tugged at his flailing body, the tails of his frock coat billowing like the wings of a tattered crow, he witnessed the redcoats taking careful aim, and – crack! crack! – Polly and Kirsty fell, clutching in surprise at the flowers of red blooming on their respective chests. Oh! Oh, that wasn't right either! The Doctor could feel it in the innermost chambers of his hearts – there was something wrong with events, something had gone askew, history was hideously out of whack.

But there was no more time to think, no more time to mourn; the noose's grip on his throat grew tighter still, agonising, beyond any pain he had experienced before. Was he going to die? Dimly, he could hear gurgling coming from the thrashing form next to him – oh no – that was Ben.

But Ben couldn't die, that wasn't fair either. Ben had only ever tried to do the right thing – he was such a good soul. And now he was dead too: Polly and Ben, both dead: and why? Because of a silly misunderstanding – and because of stupid human suspicion and paranoia. This shouldn't have happened, there was no reason for this to have happened.

Even in his grief, the Doctor spared a thought for the others; the bright, sparkling jewel that had been Kirsty – he'd known her for such a fleeting moment – and the gentle, kind boy, Jamie – why, he would have been just the right sort to venture out into the wider universe and see its joys and wonders, sharing in the voyages of his Ship, but that wasn't going to happen now – and last of all, the dying Laird with his secret beneath his coat – the redcoats were going to find out what he'd been hiding, and who knew what consequences that would have?

It was all ending, thought the Doctor, and it was ending wrong. The rope burned tighter still, crushing his throat, choking him; a rushing sound filled his ears – would he rejuvenate again, he wondered? He was awfully far from the TARDIS; that might interfere with the process for all he knew: there were so many things he didn't know.

He lost track of how long he dangled there, his limp body swaying in the wind. The pain was unimaginable, a torture exceeding any description, but still, he didn't die. His people were made of stern stuff, hardier by far than any mere human. Oh, how he regretted the frailty of his friends – if only they had been as resilient as he.

Distantly, echoing through the roaring sound that blotted out most of his hearing, he could make out the soldiers arguing. Their words were meaningless to him,

random disassociated sounds in the midst of his ordeal, just part of the background to his suffering.

When would the pain end?

∞

'Cut him down,' barked Ffinch shortly, barely able to believe his eyes.

'I've heard tale of this type of thing before, sir,' whispered his Sergeant. 'They say a man with a strong enough neck can take a hanging and live.'

Ffinch turned on the fool angrily. 'Not when I'm hanging him, he won't!' he spat. 'You must have tied the rope incorrectly, you oaf! Put another one on him and string the wretch up a second time.'

'Yes sir,' muttered his subordinate surlily. 'But they say it's bad luck to hang a man twice. If he lives, it proves his innocence – so they says, sir.'

With a crafty smile, Ffinch said oleaginously, 'Very well, if he can survive this method of execution and you're so squeamish about repeating the act we'll resort to other means, but believe me sergeant, I will see him dead!'

'Of course, sir,' responded the soldier quickly, 'enemy of the Crown, deserves to die, sir, quite agree, sir. Show no quarter, like the Duke said.'

Ffinch still had that sly gleam in his eyes as he said, 'I saw some bricks stacked all higgledy-piggledy round the back of the cottage, sergeant. Go and have them taken inside and piled up. And get something to cement them together – Jenkins used to be a builder in Gloucester, didn't he? Get him on it.'

'Sir?' queried the soldier uncertainly.

Ffinch snorted nastily. 'If our diminutive magician here can withstand the hangman's noose, we'll see how long he can live without food or water, or even sunlight.' He clapped the sergeant on the shoulder. 'Wall him up, man! And leave him for posterity to puzzle over! We'll be rid of his troublesome presence and we can get on with rounding up the rest of this scrofulous rabble.'

Seeing a flash of material from beneath the folds of one of the dead prisoners' over-garments, Ffinch paused and snapped crossly, 'What's that under the ringleader's coat, man? Didn't you search the prisoners? Damn it all to Hades, do I have to supervise everything you incompetents do?'

The sergeant immediately strode over to the corpse and tore the coat open, revealing for all to see what had lain beneath the Laird's attire: the standard of Bonnie Prince Charlie!

'Well,' breathed Ffinch, 'that rather indisposes the rebels' plans, don't you think? They must have been up to something diabolically treacherous with that in their possession

– something they now won't be able to do. Fortune smiles on us today.' He clapped his hands briskly. 'Now, let's make this a day to remember in every way: hurry and brick up that irritating little fellow into a nice, cosy nook. And make it snug, chaps, he'll be spending the rest of eternity in there and we want it to be comfortable for him.' Laughing, he straightened his three-cornered hat and swaggered over to his horse, revelling in his victory.

∞

Turlough felt the gentle, comforting hum of the TARDIS alter in pitch as the central rotor stopped rising and falling. Standing on the opposite side of the hexagonal control console in the Ship's eccentric equivalent of a bridge, the Doctor cried cheerfully, 'By proxy, we've landed!'

'I do wish you'd stop saying that,' said Turlough wearily. 'I didn't think it was at all you when you shouted it out on Heracletus, and it's no more convincing now.' That troubled world had been their last port of call and the site of a particularly involved misadventure.

'No?' asked the Doctor in surprise, his fair eyebrows arched innocently above his watery blue eyes. 'I was trying out a new expression, seeing if it fit. No good?'

'Definitely not,' opined Turlough, his hands stuffed in the pockets of his old school trousers. He smiled at the Time Lord's predilection for an odd turn of phrase and nodded at the becalmed rotor. 'Where are we?'

'Well, you remember hearing mention of a race called the Lorq?' began the Doctor, but Turlough interrupted.

'Yeah, sure, their ambassador was the only alien the Heracletes had ever met.' He remembered the barren world they'd just left and the temporal mess they'd managed to put right – unfortunately it was a mess they had created in the first place, but at least they had cancelled it out, and as Turlough always thought, no harm no foul, which was true as far as the state of the space-time continuum went, but altogether less true when it came to the annihilated Heracletes, their entire civilisation wiped out by the rewriting of history.

But he didn't want to dwell on that horror, and instead continued to answer the Doctor: 'This far out on the galactic rim the stars are so far apart it's logistically difficult for spacefaring races to stumble into each other, which is why the Heracletes had never met any other species.'

'Well, yes,' huffed the Doctor, clearly put out at having his chance at explaining things taken away. 'The Lorq are renowned for travelling through the loneliest reaches of the void in craft called vault ships.'

'Vault?' questioned Turlough. 'As in bank vault?'

'Possibly,' conceded the Doctor, flicking switches and throwing levers on the console in a fit of activity. He bounded over to the distinctly Earthly hat stand positioned incongruously in the corner of the unearthly console room and fetched his cream-coloured panama hat, calling out excitedly, 'I don't know what they have in their vaults, no-one does; they keep the contents very hush-hush. So I thought I'd find out what they are. Should be interesting getting to the bottom of that tiny cosmic mystery, don't you agree?'

Turlough could only conclude, therefore, that they'd materialized their time-ship onboard one of these so-called vault ships.

'Um,' he said, visualising any number of potential problems, the uppermost of which troubled him enough to make him ask, 'if it's such a big secret and they make such a big deal of keeping it, won't they object to us snooping around?'

'Quite probably,' agreed the Doctor breezily. 'We'll just have to be very inventive in our excuses.'

But before Turlough could argue the foolishness of this, the Doctor had operated the door control and was already dashing outside. Why wouldn't the Doctor ever listen to Turlough's pragmatism? It wasn't always a good idea to rush in where angels feared to tread – as Vislor Turlough had learnt the hard way: his caution wasn't cowardice – it was common sense.

Trudging in the Time Lord's footsteps, seemingly always stuck bringing up the rear, Turlough stepped outside too. With a shock, he saw several ranks of waist-high furry creatures surrounding the police box exterior of the TARDIS; the Doctor had taken the sensible precaution of raising his hands and was saying calmly, 'We come in peace. We mean you no harm.'

Turlough followed suit, lifting his own hands. As he did so he took in the details of the weapons the aliens were pointing at them and the cramped, dirty grey tunnels of the vault ship's interior. These four-armed bear-like beings were presumably the Lorq, and they didn't seem pleased to see the Doctor and Turlough.

One of the short, furry creatures growled throatily, 'Peace, you say? You mean us no harm, you claim? Do you think us fools? We know you are the alien who murdered our leader in cold blood. Don't try to deceive us, we recognise you well enough! You are under arrest for your despicable crime, and the punishment will surely be death!'

Casting his eyes heavenward, Turlough muttered disgustedly, 'And what inventive excuse will you use to get us out of this, Doctor?'

Unsurprisingly, the Time Lord was stumped for an answer.

∞

Far away, separated from the unfolding events on the vault ship by uncountable tracts of space and unfathomable chasms of time, two robed humanoids stood watching a screen. Both stood with airs of carefully cultivated haughty insouciance, their identical features and frames making it look as if one were merely the reflection of the other in some invisible mirror. But both were real, and equally filled with distaste for the other.

They were soundlessly enraptured by the visceral sight of an unconscious renegade lying insensate on the heather of a Scottish glen, and they were both trying not to let it show how much this sight disturbed them. For neither one of them dared to exhibit the slightest weakness in front of the other.

A rope was still coiled viciously tight about the renegade's neck, the skin there torn and bleeding: such physical suffering was, for the mirror-image humanoids, an unknown quantity all but eliminated in their culture.

'If you so desire,' said the one on the left smoothly, designated Rorovalk 2, 'I will show you what happened next.'

'I would be obliged,' said the other one coldly: the one who thought of himself as the real Rorovalk by dint of being native to the continuum they were currently inhabiting, who knew he was the indisputably true and correct Rorovalk, the one that held the claim to being called Rorovalk 1, or indeed Rorovalk Prime. He added testily, 'One can hardly leave the narrative dangling there.'

Standing before the infinity viewer in the convoluted topographical folds of the Incident Room's higher-dimensional architecture, the alternate shrugged, remarking in poor taste, 'Would it not be apposite? The Doctor was left dangling – at the end of a rope.'

'Please refrain from your inadequate witticisms, I implore you: we are here to prevent–'

'I know why we're here,' snapped back his duplicate in annoyance; he was, naturally enough, physically identical to Rorovalk in every way, differing only in his demeanour. 'It was you that insisted on this voyeurism, if you recall.'

'I still maintain it's a useful exercise…'

'Yes, yes,' sighed the alternate, cutting off Rorovalk 1 in mid-flow. 'I've moved the viewer on a few days. We're looking at the narrow interior of the space where the Doctor was walled up. I've taken the liberty of compensating for the lack of lighting: in actuality, it was pitch dark in there, but if we maintained authenticity we wouldn't be able to see anything.'

Rorovalk 1 nodded his impatient thanks and they watched what happened next in silence.

Awakening from the healing trance he'd retreated into, his injuries mostly repaired by this point, the Doctor looked about his surroundings groggily, gradually realising the

dreadful extent of the predicament he faced. He was standing upright inside a cramped, suffocating space, the grainy texture of the brick only inches from his face. Sitting was impossible, even raising his arms from his sides required Houdini-like contortions in the shallow confines of his stygian prison. For many long minutes he struggled against the interior surface of the wall, slamming his hands into the sharp, uneven faces of the roughly hewn blocks over and over again, in the end achieving nothing more than the ruination of his hands.

'He can't get any leverage, you see,' said Rorovalk 2. 'The space is too narrow for him to properly extend his arms.'

'So how long was he in there before he was rescued?' asked Rorovalk 1, scratching under the constricting material of his golden-hued skullcap as he spoke: his scalp always got so itchy when he was forced to wear his official robes and their accoutrements.

'Rescued?' frowned the other, clad in his robes of subtly different design, the tiny differences so revealing of his divergent origins. 'You mean rescued by his friends? No, they're really dead. Humans die quite easily, you realise. There was no help from that quarter.'

'Oh,' said Rorovalk. 'So what happened?'

The other blinked at him and answered as patiently as he could manage, 'Well, he starved to death. The English redcoats left him there to die, so he died.'

'Ah. I see. And then?'

'Well, as I understand it, in your history he was arrested by a specially convened tribunal at the end of his second incarnation, in response to his sending an appeal for help to the home world – he rather gave away his location by doing so and facilitated their capture of him – and they forced a regeneration on him for his misdemeanours. Here, of course, he regenerated from natural causes, in response to physical trauma, entering into his third incarnation without his appearance being dictated from on-high.'

Wonderingly, Rorovalk 1 said, 'So this is what his third incarnation should have looked like?'

'Yes, if you like.' They watched the process of bodily renewal unfolding before them on the viewer with detached interest. Eventually, Rorovalk 2 commented, 'I actually prefer this one: I find the reddish goatee and short-cropped hair much more aesthetically pleasing than the coiffured mane of silver, and penchant for ruffles and silk, the one in your reality wound up with.'

'Each to his own,' retorted Rorovalk 1, unwilling to admit that anything in his alternate's reality could be superior to the equivalent in his own. 'So, then he managed to escape?'

'No,' said his alternate waspishly. 'He didn't escape on his own. He couldn't: it

was impossible, even for him. Despite all rumours to the contrary, he isn't endowed with superpowers: he is just as constrained by the laws of physics as we are. No, he died again. It takes about a week for a freshly regenerated Gallifreyan to starve to death—let's skip the interval, shall we?' The alternate thought at the view screen and instructed it thusly.

Now the Doctor was in possession of a wild mass of curly brown hair, complete with the familiar beak of a nose, protruding eyes and wide, toothy smile. The clothes of his second incarnation, unchanging with the bodily transformations, had split under the stress of accommodating this taller, broader frame. They could hear this new version talking to himself, intoning lugubriously, the rich, mellifluous voice echoing in the tiny confines of the upright coffin, 'I knew a woman once, she had a pig, how she enjoyed dressing it in ribbons. Ah, the frost-patterns on the leaves in the early morning: I traced the outline of the veins – but Oswald, I said, black doesn't suit you, you should give it up – '

'Is he insane?' asked Rorovalk 1 awkwardly.

'No more than you'd expect,' the other replied distantly, unmoved.

Following a brief pause, Rorovalk 1 pressed, 'So then he got out?'

Sighing deeply, the alternate replied heavily, 'No, he died again.'

'But this is simply ghastly. No-one, not even a renegade, deserves that.'

'It wasn't until he reached his fifth incarnation that he thought to check the contents of his pockets.'

'Pockets?'

'If you recall, your Doctor sent a message to the home world using a thought cube, the pieces of which he had been carting around absent-mindedly ever since he first put his frock coat on.' The alternate waved airily at the image on the screen. 'Eventually he remembered he could shout for help.'

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Having been unceremoniously dragged before the leader of the Lorq – a personage they'd discovered was called Zh'kah, but who was addressed more respectfully as the Key-holder – the Doctor found himself talking for his life. Turlough was relieved to find he wasn't included in these proceedings, the Lorq having no proof of his guilt.

From the sidelines he watched the Key-holder question his friend fiercely, the three feet tall creature pacing around the manacled form of the Doctor. The ursine aliens had forced the Doctor down on his knees, to bring him closer to their eye-line, but he was probably grateful not to be standing anyway as the chains shackling his wrists and ankles looked heavy and uncomfortable, and this way he could at least rest them on the dark grey deck plates.

'You will confess your crimes, monster!' roared the Key-holder, spittle flying from its fanged jaws; the Lorq were far from being cuddly teddy bears, their eyes burnt with a ferocious inner light, and tough, sinuous muscles moved visibly beneath their outer fur – these were strong, dangerously-fast moving aliens, more than capable of eviscerating their prey with their bare claws alone.

'Crimes?' shot back the Doctor. 'It would help, you know, if you could at least tell me what these crimes are supposed to be. I can hardly defend myself if you won't –'

Almost apoplectic with rage, the Key-holder screamed, 'You claim ignorance? You dare to feign such innocence? You invade our vault ship, you murder our revered leader –'

'Ah, yes, that's what the Lorq in charge of the guards said. But that didn't make any sense to me – how can I have killed your leader if I've only just arrived here, eh? You tell me that.'

Soundlessly, the Key-holder strutted over to a wall-mounted control and punched in a command. A hologram formed in mid-air next to the bowed Doctor, showing the interior of a high-ranking Lorq's bedchamber – one that Turlough assumed belonged to the murdered leader. He could see a brown-furred creature working away at its desk, all four arms moving in concert as it ploughed through a mass of paperwork; the scene unfolded flawlessly, the picture and sound quality excellent. Without warning, the air behind the industrious Lorq shimmered and a figure materialized, a gun clasped in its outstretched hand. In stunned amazement, Turlough blurted out, 'That's the Doctor!'

'Yes,' said the new Lorq leader heavily. 'So it is.'

'Thank you, Turlough, that was very helpful,' muttered the Doctor with a glowering look. 'Please don't be upset if I decide not to enlist you as my defence lawyer.'

The scene continued before Turlough's disbelieving eyes: the Doctor – and it was indisputably him despite the odd clothing – smiled a cold smile at the erstwhile Key-holder and fired his gun at point-blank range, blowing a ragged hole in the Lorq's chest. It was a brutal, calculated murder, and once the Doctor had confirmed the leader was dead, he reached inside his open, black jacket and pressed something hidden in an inside pocket, promptly fading into nothingness.

'You dispute you are the same humanoid?' pressed the new Key-holder. 'Look at you, your physiology is identical, your features are the same, even your feckless body language is indistinguishable.'

'Steady on,' objected the Doctor. But Turlough could tell he was rattled; it really was the Doctor in the holographic recording of the murder. Turlough recognised every aspect of the Doctor's countenance in the recording: the straw-coloured hair that covered the tops of his ears and touched his collar at the back, that fell in a gentle wave over his

high, unlined forehead; the soft curve of his oval face and the round chin that was so couchant it could be described as weak; the thin contours of his long nose; the narrow lips of his mouth; the frowning brow atop his sad-looking eyes of aquamarine – in short it was without any doubt the smooth-skinned aspect of the Doctor: and he'd been caught in the act. What defence could there be?

'The particulars of the crime are these,' announced the Key-holder. 'Three ship-days ago you appeared briefly aboard our vessel and murdered our leader. You then disappeared back into the ether. We despaired of ever apprehending you, and in those sad, grief-filled hours I, the former deputy, was appointed to carry on our great leader's work, becoming the new Key-holder of the Sacred Vault, possessor of the Access Codes That Shalt Never Be Uttered – but now you have returned to the scene of your crime, brought low by the one thing you could never have anticipated: we protect the treasure of the vault so selflessly, so totally, we place surveillance devices in every nook and cranny of our craft – no intruder can go undetected, no action can occur onboard a vault ship without the Lorq being aware of it, and so we knew you were the one responsible. Little could you have suspected, but even the Key-holder's private quarters are monitored. We have been hounded and pursued by the greedy, avaricious races of the galaxy for so many millennia, our legendarily impenetrable spaceship fortresses stocked to the gunwales with the treasure of the Lorq race, the subject of so much attention that we have resorted to the most extreme measures to protect our hoard – the cornerstone of our very society. Driven to the edge of paranoia, we have fled from these raids, forced out to the galactic rim, far from most other species, as we hide our bounty in the remotest, least populated reaches of space.'

'Yes,' mused the Doctor quietly, 'Just you and the Heracletes out here on the edge of the intra-galactic void.'

Turlough tried to catch the Key-holder's attention as politely as he could manage – he didn't want to anger these creatures any more than they already were, and once he'd managed to get permission to speak, he ventured, 'I'd like to say that I've travelled with the Doctor for quite a while, and I swear in all that time, he's never done anything cruel or heartless – he certainly didn't do what we saw in the recording. I give you my word.'

The new Key-holder nodded respectfully. 'Your loyalty is commendable. And because you were not present at the moment of the crime, we do not hold you accountable in any way for this perfidious act. As far as we are aware, you are blameless in this matter. But we detected a chronotic trace in your friend's arrival and departure, indicating that he traversed time. Can you say with certitude that he didn't commit this dastardly murder before you met him, or that he will never commit this vile act in the future, after you cease your acquaintanceship? If he is a time-traveller as we suspect, it is entirely likely that he has

not as yet performed these evil deeds in his personal timeline; regardless of that, however, he is guilty and we will punish him.'

Turlough stuttered desperately, 'I just can't believe –'

'You don't need to believe,' shot back the Key-holder, indicating the holographic projection with one paw. 'You simply need to look.'

'You don't understand,' pleaded Turlough. 'The Doctor is innately good – he just couldn't do that. This must somehow be a case of mistaken identity.' Turlough couldn't believe the Doctor would ever be capable of doing what they'd seen: he refused to even consider the idea – it was preposterous.

The Key-holder laughed in his face. 'You suggest we discount the evidence of our own eyes?'

The Doctor butted in, saying carefully, 'Mistaken identity? I think you might be on to something there, Turlough. I can say with absolute certainty that I've never worn the clothes we see in that recording: I've grown rather fond of my current attire and anyway, black really doesn't suit me.'

The Key-holder took a moment to compare the Doctor's current garments – cream coloured trousers with vertical red stripes, combined with an Edwardian cricketer's outfit of a white woolly jumper and white shirt topped with a long cream jacket that sported a sprig of vegetation on its lapel – with the hologrammatic Doctor's black jacket and charcoal-grey trousers. 'That is merely further proof that you will commit this offence in the future, assuming we take your words on trust.'

'You're going to punish me for something I haven't done yet?' asked the Doctor mildly. 'Do you think that's entirely fair?'

The Key-holder snorted derisively. 'We will have justice, Doctor.'

'And what about the damage to the time-stream you'd cause by executing a criminal before he's committed the crime he's accused of, hmm? Have you considered that?'

The Key-holder snarled back, 'The possibility of a paradox is not sufficient grounds to set aside our just retribution, Doctor.'

Turlough took in more details of the recording as it cycled through again; there was something familiar about the Doctor in the three-dimensional images – something he couldn't quite put his finger on, an indefinable edge of hardness to the eyes, a certain tightness to the jaw-line. All of a sudden he had it – his memory finally dredging up something it didn't want to recall, something that history had been trying to write out of existence in the aftermath of the collapsed temporal mess on Heracletus. 'That wasn't the Doctor at all!' he shouted wildly, drawing ferocious stares from the surrounding ranks of Lorq. 'That was the Savant!'

The Doctor sighed deeply. 'Well, I'm glad someone finally got there. I mean to

say, fancy thinking it was me. I'm rather insulted by that.' He blew out his cheeks and added wistfully, 'Now I know revealing the nature of the villain so early on in Act I goes against all theatrical tradition, but this sort of things happens so often to me, I'm glad we've got it out of the way nice and early on. Believe me, it'll save all sorts of pointless messing about later on.' He jangled his manacles meaningfully and coughed. 'Aren't you forgetting to do something?'

The Key-holder looked backwards and forwards between the two bizarre creatures, finally exclaiming, 'Savant? What do you mean? What is this insanity?'

The Doctor grinned widely at the Lorq's leader. 'Well, Savant literally means a "learned man", but let's not dwell on semantics. It's more important to know that he's a version of me from another reality: a reality where history went awry. And he's a version who I can easily believe would do something like this. Turlough was right – and it's not often I get to say that – this is a case of mistaken identity. You've got the wrong man, Key-holder, understandable though your error was.'

The Lorq waved their claims aside without even considering them. 'You must think me a simple-minded fool, Doctor. This is the feeblest of defences and I will hear no more of it. I find you guilty of trespass and murder: for which I am pleased and honoured to sentence you to death.'

Disappointed, the Doctor let his shackles fall back to the floor. 'I knew it couldn't be this easy.'

'No!' shouted Turlough, this time physically restrained by two burly Lorq who clutched at his waist and legs. 'You can't! We've explained to you what really happened!'

But the Lorq weren't having any of it. Their new leader announced gravely, 'You will be taken to a place of waiting and at the next ship-dawn; you will be executed by vaporisation. It is a merciful death, Doctor. Frankly, I don't believe you deserve such mercy but we will not lower ourselves to your standards.'

'Listen to me!' begged Turlough, 'You're making a terrible mistake!'

'No,' retorted the Key-holder brusquely, 'we are revenging ourselves.' He gestured towards the hatchway. 'Take the Doctor's friend to an empty sleeping chamber where he can be cared for in his distress.' He stared at Turlough, adding, 'You see? We are not a callous race. You need not fear us.'

As Turlough was dragged away, losing sight of the manacled, helpless Doctor, he yelled at the top of his lungs, 'No, but you need to fear the Savant! You've got to find out what he was doing here! You don't understand how dangerous he is! He could destroy us all!'

∞

Earlier

'This cannot be allowed,' said Rorovalk 1 primly. 'He must be stopped.'

'Oh, we concur wholeheartedly,' Rorovalk 2 assured him instantly, 'which is why we alerted you to the infraction in the first place. An intrusion on your reality that your Matrix seems to have missed.'

Rorovalk 1 felt his hackles rise at the barb, replying irritably, 'You know full well that you warned us at the exact moment we were sending a complaint to your High Council –'

'War Council,' corrected 2 smoothly.

'Very well, War Council if you insist – but that hardly alters the fact that your communication arrived suspiciously soon after we'd made the decision to lodge a formal protest. There are hardly grounds to accuse our Matrix of ineptitude.'

His doppelgänger held up his hands to ward off any further squabbling, making Rorovalk 1 look like the one who was being petty. Fuming silently at this version of himself from an alternate reality, Rorovalk – the one who was entitled to be in this reality, he reminded himself, and was thusly by all agreed protocols nominally the 'real' one – turned away from the immature cretin and his posturing. And what a bizarre iteration of himself Rorovalk 2 was, he thought smugly; much less refined in his sensibilities than he – the original – and possibly even a great deal less intelligent to boot. Why, the chap seemed obsessed with scoring points rather than in doing his job, which was of course to sort out this unholy mess of the reality-impinging renegade before he could cause any more havoc.

'We were tasked by our respective governments to resolve this, and we must not hesitate to act,' insisted Rorovalk 1 prissily, with his back still turned.

His alternate had the impertinence to sigh. 'This is your sandpit; I was waiting for you to give the word. Go on, order the Savant's removal from the time-stream – drag him kicking and screaming back here and we can end this.'

That was better! At least 2 was showing a little respect now. Rorovalk choked down his ire and faced his alternate again, all smiles. 'I am gratified that the Time Lords of your reality show such willingness to punish the crimes of their own. On behalf of my Gallifrey, I extend our appreciation.'

They both looked in the infinity window taking up the extent of the wall facing them, and absorbed the details of the image it showed: the fair-haired renegade was shown in the act of shooting down a short, furry being, murdering it in cold blood; the scene was suspended in time, an eternal crystalline moment exposing his guilt for all to see.

Rorovalk 1 said softly, 'Although I have to say, I am somewhat surprised that the Savant would concern himself with crimes of such a pedestrian nature.'

'Really?' said 2 loftily. 'What's so odd about it?'

The native Rorovalk snorted with derision. 'As you are essentially the same as me, I know perfectly well when you're lying, you know.'

'I have been nothing but forthcoming – !' protested the alternate strenuously.

Rorovalk 1 held up a hand imperiously to forestall any further bluster. 'Enough. I will get at the root of this renegade's motives by examining his past for myself. Kindly give the viewer the correct temporal coordinates and show me the point his time-stream diverged from our Doctor's – and don't argue, or I'll have you put under close confinement. Give me sufficient cause and you could even face an oubliette.'

Shrugging, the alternate did as bidden, commenting evenly, 'We have nothing to hide.'

'We'll see,' retorted Rorovalk 1. 'We'll soon see.'

∞

The Doctor could hear humans moving about the house. They sounded like children: the pitch of their voices and their excited babbling giving their ages away. He tried to attract their attention, slamming his raw and bleeding palms against the bricks imprisoning him; he was so weak, so devastated by the physical ravages of his confinement – he hadn't been able to feel his legs for days now and he wasn't sure his spine had emerged straight from his last regeneration – he didn't know if he was making enough noise to be heard.

But then the voices paused and one child spoke up clearly and distinctly, 'Is there something in the wall?'

'Yes!' shouted the Doctor hoarsely, the words tumbling from a throat that had never known the thirst-quenching boon of any liquid. 'Help me! Dig out these bricks, I beg you: let me free.'

In the aftermath of Culloden, in the dreadful clearances, many children must have been orphaned, thought the Doctor – these waifs had surely found the cottage unattended and decided to take up residence, trying to create new lives together in the blood-soaked wreckage of their past.

After what seemed an age there came a scraping at the wall that formed the whole of the Doctor's world: gradually, oh-so-gradually, a single brick was pried loose. In the sudden shaft of light, a single beacon of light in the utter dark of his tomb, the Doctor's eyes flowed with tears: this was the first sunlight his new eyes had ever seen and it was unutterably precious to him.

'Thank you, thank you,' he babbled deliriously. 'Please let me out.'

A grubby, soil-smeared face peered in at him: the cherubic features of a ten or

eleven year old boy. 'It's a yellow-haired thing,' the child said in his heavy Scot's brogue, the TARDIS still providing the translation from the Gaelic. 'It has the face of a man, d'ye ken?'

Behind him, the Doctor caught glimpses of two younger girls in tattered Highland clothes. One of them piped up, 'But we watched the cottage for two days and two nights to make sure it was safe. You said there was no-one inside, Rab.'

The boy squinted at the Doctor, no trace of kindness in his gaze. 'I said there was nothing living inside, Molly. If this were a man, he would've starved long before now. These bricks were set weeks ago; the mortar was hard and difficult to dig out. But this thing lives and speaks: it's a dark thing, an evil spirit, trying to steal our chance at happiness.'

'No,' groaned the Doctor. 'Please, I've been in here so long, you've got to release me. I'm no goblin or sprite: I'm a simple traveller walled up in here by the redcoats.'

'That settles it,' spat the boy called Rab. 'It's been weeks since the English were here. No mortal man could survive so long without food or water. You've proven yourself to be a hell-sent spawn of the Devil. Your own words have betrayed you.'

'What? No, you can't mean that – you've got to –'

'Pay this succubus no heed,' hissed the boy. 'Molly, Rosemary, never listen to it – all its words are lies. It will try to trick us, try to deny us this cottage. We've lost everything else; I'll no lose this too. I pledged to protect you and so I will, demon-spawn or no demon-spawn.' And deaf to the Doctor's cries, the boy put the brick back in place and resealed the tomb.

∞

Turlough paced about the cramped confines of the Lorq chamber lent to him, his strides observed by Ushnah, the four-armed bear-creature assigned to attend to his needs. 'You should relax,' advised his minder. 'This isn't helping. Wouldn't you rather drink a nice relaxing cup of cha-lah?'

'Why wouldn't your leader listen?' moaned Turlough. He had to get to the bottom of things, the Doctor's fate rested in his hands, and trapped in a holding area like this, forced to wait impotently for his friend's execution, wasn't getting him anywhere: he could feel the seconds slipping through his fingers.

'Do you blame him? Your claims are ludicrous.'

Turlough slammed his fist into his palm. 'But it's all true! We encountered the Savant on Heracletus – he's an exact duplicate of the Doctor, but the product of another history.'

His minder sighed and crossed two sets of arms. 'We sent an ambassador to

Heracletus, but he died of cancer, or so I heard. Not the most successful of contacts. We haven't heard anything from them in ages – we think they might have wiped themselves out.'

Turlough ignored the comment about the death of the Heracletes, concentrating on the part that bothered him. 'I thought you were trying to keep a low profile? Why did you contact the Heracletes?'

'Ah, we need supplies from time to time. Sometimes it's worth the danger to establish interstellar relations.'

Turlough stared at the Lorq, certain that it was lying. He couldn't imagine why, though. Putting that issue aside for the moment he went on, his thoughts occupied by his recent troubles on Heracletus.

'You won't remember what happened on Heracletus – time has adjusted to wipe out those events.' Ignoring the Lorq's puzzled reaction, Turlough went on, 'We found an artefact called the Spline. It seemed to be a time corridor connecting the future to the past. The Heracletes were using it to take resources from their own future to use in the present, blindly ignoring the temporal paradox that threw up. Naturally, the Doctor and I tried to shut it down, but we were cast into different universes the second we stepped out of the TARDIS, and in my iteration of reality I encountered a version of the Doctor I learnt was called the Savant.'

'Really,' said Ushnah levelly, plainly not believing a word of it.

'Yes! I fell in with the rebels of my reality to storm the Spline's control centre, unaware that the Doctor had similarly inveigled himself into the control room in his reality. He found that the Time Lords had already acted to encapsulate the Spline inside a time loop, but that the loop had been bungled: as the Heracletes reached the end of their four-year period, they were sent back to its start by the loop, but this caused divergent realities to splinter off the Spline – each time they went through the loop they lived their lives differently, creating more and more histories, leading to a bigger and bigger mess as time went on. At first we thought the Spline was the result of time technology given to the Heracletes by your species –'

'We never traded time technology with the Heracletes,' objected his minder angrily.

Ignoring the impassioned outburst, Turlough went on, reliving those harrowing events. 'But it soon became clear that the Spline was filled with TARDIS components, and the Doctor worked out the Spline wasn't anything to do with your people, it was actually his own time-ship, stretched over aeons, elongated into the form of the Spline.'

'Told you it wasn't us,' remarked Ushnah smugly.

'The TARDIS had blundered into a weak patch of time on Heracletus, blowing

it wide open on landing and causing the whole calamity; in the initial, overlaid history the Heracletes had used it to create the Spline, but this initial version of history wasn't stable, it shattered into hundreds of histories. The Doctor and I fell into two of them the instant we left the Ship: in some histories the Savant tried to destroy the Spline as part of a mission for the Time Lords, in some the Lorq Ambassador was murdered and his technology stolen to create the artefact, in some completely different things happened – no wonder the Time Lords tried to shut it all off from the rest of reality. Under the weight of all this chaos and the Savant's bungled attempts to shut it down, the fabric of time itself was starting to rupture and we had to work quickly to stabilise the time-stream, our various worlds starting to bleed into one another. We succeeded in undoing the damage, cancelling out the entire sequence of events by changing the past, with the Savant's self-interested help.'

'Sounds very heroic,' chortled the minder. 'Don't believe a word of it. I mean, listen to yourself – call that likely, do you? You must think I was born yesterday.'

To himself, Turlough added, 'But the Savant we met there was an unreal possibility thrown up by the temporal chaos – a sight of what might have been – does he have an actual existence in some alternate reality, then? Are we facing the real Savant here?'

Ushnah threw up his hands, all four of them. 'You're really trying with this charade, aren't you? I'm impressed by your perseverance, if nothing else. But honestly, if you're gonna try and spin a tall tale like that and expect anyone to fall for it, you need to work on making it sound more plausible. And put some sex and violence in it: the masses like stuff like that. Oh, and gratuitous fart gags: they're always popular. No, I've got to say, as it stands right now, your story just isn't up to par. In my opinion, it really needs a lot of work.'

'It isn't a story!' objected Turlough furiously. 'That's literally what happened! I'm not responsible for how unlikely it all sounds!'

Ushnah sniggered into a paw, managing to gasp between guffaws, 'Oh, you are a one and no mistake. But really, as if anything like that would actually happen.'

The indignant Turlough had ceased his nervous pacing because of this heated exchange, and now he took the opportunity to ask his watcher intently, 'Is there anything else going on here? Anything else out of the ordinary? Anything that might have attracted the Savant to this time and place – to this reality?'

The Lorq minder replied idly, glad of any chance to gossip, 'The only thing that could be described as out of the usual run of things right now is the delegation of Amentethys we've got temporarily lodged on the upper level.'

Turlough gave his full attention to the Lorq. 'Tell me about these Amentethys.'

'If you wish, I was told to accede to any reasonable requests and sitting here in stony silence doesn't really appeal. Well, the Amentethys contacted our ship a few

weeks ago, offering to barter for the contents of our vault. That was certainly out of the ordinary.'

'Barter for it?' pressed Turlough. 'But I thought you weren't prepared to part with your treasure for anything?'

'We are only considering their offer – it is remarkably generous, and it's a nice change to have aliens talking to us rather than attempting to breach our defences by force, as so many have tried before. We're trying to come to an accommodation as we speak – to decide on a, whatchamacallit, a fair exchange. Our leaders are divided on the issue of selling our hoard, but while negotiations proceed we've allowed the Amentethys to rendezvous with our ship. They've come closer than any ship has for three generations, and given their environmental needs we've allowed them to occupy an entire hanger to facilitate the talks – it was easier than creating a suitable environment every time they came over to talk. If you look out of an external viewer, you'll see their craft alongside ours.'

Turlough prodded at the cabin's viewer controls and did as Ushnah had suggested. An image of a delta-winged vehicle came into focus on the oval display unit. The vessel looked big, easily as large as anything Turlough's people had in their fleet. And it looked close, only a few hundred metres off the Lorq ship's starboard. This kind of proximity was clearly unusual for a race so paranoid about being robbed.

'What is your treasure?' asked Turlough; all of a sudden aware he didn't actually know what it was.

'That's confidential information,' replied the minder unhelpfully. 'I'm not going to encourage an alien's interest in our treasure-trove by letting on what it is – it's all we've got left, I'm hardly going to endanger it.'

'I don't suppose you're going to tell me what the Amentethys are offering in exchange for it either?' said Turlough wearily.

'No, of course not: it's none of your business.'

Further wrangling was stymied by a knock at the door. Wasting no words, a Lorq messenger informed Turlough that someone wanted to see him – the Chief Negotiator of the Amentethys, and he wanted to see him right away. Turlough could hardly believe the sudden turn of events – he had no sooner learnt of the Amentethys' existence than this had happened.

'Speak of the Devil and he shall appear?' he mused aloud.

His mind reeling with the rapid unfolding of events and not even remotely knowing what he was getting himself into, Turlough left the chamber, his pulse racing. He was going to find out what was going on, he swore it silently in his heart; and he was going to save the Doctor.

∞

'You remembered the thought cube at last,' sighed the onlooking Time Lord.

Arms reached down and lifted the Doctor's prostrate form, lifting him from the cold marble floor, taking him into the light, into the comforting embrace of true civilisation.

'My name is Rorovalk,' said the callow youth, the Time Lord that had been waiting for the Doctor at the other end of the transmat beam. 'We didn't know what had happened to you, not until you sent your distress call. We acted as soon as we received it. Don't worry, Doctor, given the circumstances, all of the major charges against you have been dropped. The Lord Cardinal has instructed me to tell you –'

'Don't call me that!' snapped the crippled renegade.

Befuddled, Rorovalk answered, 'Call you what?' Eventually, he divined the renegade's meaning. 'Doctor? But that's the title you adopted so long ago –'

'No more,' the figure gasped painfully. 'They left me to die – they wouldn't rescue me even though they knew I was there. I will minister to them no more, they have betrayed me, they turned on me like the vicious animals they always were. I was a fool, a pitiable wretched fool to ever think they deserved my aid. Call me Doctor no more – from this moment on I am reborn, I am changed, I care no more for the lives of those who would so readily see me dead: for now and forevermore, I am the Savant. But my knowledge was earned at too high a cost, my wisdom gained in a crucible of torment. I am the Savant but the transformation has scorched my soul.'

Rorovalk inclined his head politely, electing to ignore the odd nature of the last couple of sentences. 'As you wish, I will address you as Savant. Now, we shall attend to your regenerative trauma; our medical experts will soon repair the physical scars you bear.'

'And what will I owe you for this generosity?' barked the Savant.

Rorovalk smiled indulgently. 'We'll talk about that later. For now, you need only rest and regain your strength. I'm sure the future will take care of itself.'

At long last, the Doctor – the Savant – was home.

∞

Rab removed the loosened brick warily, peering into the darkness beyond. 'Look,' he announced, 'the beast is gone – the evil is lifted from this house. We should rejoice, our trust in God has bested the tricks of the Devil.'

He knelt in prayer with the two girls, thanking the Lord for the end of the unholy reign of terror on their home. They had been right to ignore the plaintive cries of the

deceiver; he felt so relieved – he'd been so worried he'd been doing the wrong thing, condemning an innocent soul to death. But his spiritual fortitude had been rewarded and now they could get on with forging a new life without the spectre of death hanging over them.

∞

Turlough started to get an idea of the layout of the vault ship as he walked its dank, decaying corridors: passages that had clearly seen better days, passages that reeked of unwashed fur and Lorq sweat. His hair scraped up against the ceiling more than once as he was escorted to the Amentethys: the corridors were undoubtedly spacious for the diminutive Lorq but were barely adequate for Turlough. The decks he had access to formed a cylindrical tower, the room where the Doctor had been accused of murder occupying the central part, and the area given over to the Amentethys delegation being situated near the top. His escort confirmed his analysis, adding that the vault itself made up the bulk of the ship's mass: the tower near the rear section impaling the rectangular main body of the craft. If this was accurate – and Turlough saw no reason to doubt the messenger's proud claim – then the vault was many times larger than the living areas and drive section combined, containing who-knew-what. A vault that large had to protect an unimaginable quantity of valuables – and this was but one of the Lorq's ships, the others also scattered to the far edges of the galaxy in a desperate bid to escape detection. What could the Amentethys offer that would ever be enough to persuade the Lorq to relinquish the treasure they had guarded for so long, so diligently, the treasure that was 'all they had left'?

Turlough pondered this question, puzzling over how the Lorq were reduced to wandering the backwaters of the galaxy. What could have happened to their home world? Was it gone now? Had it fallen to the rapacious hordes that frightened the Lorq even to this day? Was that the source of their deep-rooted fear of losing everything?

They soon came to the upper level and as the door slid aside Turlough got his first look at the Amentethys.

The chamber was vast and echoing, much better maintained than the other levels he'd seen – as if the Lorq were trying to make a good impression with this one – but its most striking feature was that it was filled almost entirely with a huge armoured tank. Parts of this city-block sized container were transparent, and Turlough could see dark shapes swimming inside: it was filled with liquid! It was a glorified fish tank, he realised – the Amentethys must be water-breathers. His escort waited outside as Turlough walked to the edge of the deck, a strip of floor material that formed a broad balcony around the chamber.

The deck beneath his feet began to extend, arching across the intervening gap, roughly halfway up the reinforced mass of the tank. Turlough tried not to look over the edge, his stomach heaving at the thought of how far the drop was. He came within ten feet of the tank and the deck abruptly stopped extruding new matter, coming to an ignominious halt. Before Turlough could wonder what was happening, a panel on the exterior of the tank slid open and a smaller section slid forwards, taking up the intervening distance; this new protrusion was large enough to accommodate a single Amentethys floating in greenish bubble-filled brine.

It struck Turlough that if this was how the Amentethys moved around on dry land, in large single-person tanks, then they were hardly inconspicuous; he doubted they had any means of operating covertly inside Lorq territory – surely everyone would see a water tank gliding down the corridor? He guessed it was this inability to sneak up on anyone that had convinced the Lorq that it had been safe to allow their party onboard – they were hardly a strategic threat in a dry environment.

Turlough stared at the alien in wonder: it resembled nothing less than an Earthly dolphin, except it was a pale white in colour, striped with pink bands like an aquatic tiger: compared to the ones he'd spotted through the transparent casing this one was almost albino. Its eyes were forward facing, the hallmark of a predator, and its sleek lines were thicker, broader than a real dolphin. Although it had the dolphin trademark of a large fin in the middle of its back, it only had one set of lower fins, positioned below this main one; its eyes too were different, sparkling with intelligence, equipped with expressive lids and a furrowed brow. But unlike terrestrial aquatic mammals, the Amentethys didn't possess a blowhole, and neither did they utilise gills – they seemed to breathe whatever it was they swam in through their mouths: a hyper-oxygenated liquid perhaps?

He could hear the creature emitting a series of chirps, but these sounds were quickly translated by the TARDIS; for once the time machine seemed to be having trouble with the translation, it not quite being simultaneous.

'Greetings, orange-fringed creature we hear referred to as Turlough. We have heard of your arrival and the arrest of the Doctor. We hear about many things. We hear of his impending execution. We have summoned you here to this neutral territory where we talk face-to-face with the Lorq so often, to so little effect. I am the Chief Negotiator of the Amentethys. You may call me Benefactor, for such is the magnitude of the favour I would grant you.'

Suspiciously, Turlough replied, 'I'm always keen on accepting favours. What would you like to do for me?'

'My purpose is to negotiate. I would negotiate with you, Turlough, the being closest to the Doctor, the being able to negotiate on his behalf. Negotiate with you to give

you that which you most desire. The Lorq are recalcitrant, they do not talk in good faith; they will never agree to our terms, no matter how generous they are, and thus we require a new plan.'

'Yes, might I ask what your generous terms are, what you're offering them?' He held his breath – would the alien tell him?

'We offer a way to rebuild their dead and shattered world, reduced to dust and cometary debris – we show them a way they can reclaim everything they lost. We offer the fulfilment of all their dreams – and yet, still they hesitate, so unwilling are they to relinquish their grasp on their legendary treasure.'

Turlough choked out, 'Build a world? What, literally?'

The dolphin-analogue seemed amused by his reaction. 'It is a little thing to build a planet. The Amentethys learnt these techniques many ages past. And yet the Lorq need this. What do you need, Turlough? What would you negotiate for?'

'The rescue of my friend, the Doctor,' he replied instantly.

'Ah, yes. We can arrange this – it is a little thing.'

'What do you want in return?' asked Turlough, still suspicious.

The Chief Negotiator replied slyly, 'We would wish the same thing we want from the Lorq. Now you are here, you offer a second opportunity for us to obtain it, a second source of it to us.'

'Yes, but a second source of what?'

'Time travel,' answered the dolphin-like alien. 'We want the designs of your time engines. Your friend knows the secrets of the Time Lords – if we free him, we want certain guarantees, and much assistance. You must swear to this.'

Turlough felt like vomiting. He had no choice. He had to get the Doctor out of this – and they could deal with the Amentethys later. At least this answered the mystery of what the Lorq had in their vaults, what had been so desired by so many races, and indeed, why the Lorq would never give it up. Trying not to let his duplicity show in his voice, he replied, 'We have a deal. Time Lord technology in exchange for the Doctor's release.'

He was pleased to see his façade of complicity had convinced the Negotiator – but then, Turlough had had considerable experience in making deals with the Devil.

∞

The Key-holder watched the surveillance material on Turlough's meeting in a rage. 'They dare to deceive us!' he ranted. 'They negotiate one deal with us in public and then the moment another source of temporal technology arrives they seek to stab us in the back!'

He turned to his council of advisors and declaimed, 'They are condemned by their

own words – they will act to free the Doctor. Have him brought here immediately. We will keep him with us, guarded as fiercely as our vault, to stymie their pernicious plans. We will not be deprived of our revenge.'

A senior council member spoke up, 'We must answer their duplicity. Our reputation depends on it.'

'How right you are,' agreed the Key-holder. 'We will send soldiers and have their negotiating party turfed off the vault ship; and good riddance to them. I am sick of their plots within plots – they are insane to think they can deceive us! They have no idea who they're dealing with.' With righteous indignation, the orders were given, and the Lorq moved to evict the traitorous water-breathers.

Inside the watery domain of the Amentethys, the Chief Negotiator approached his senior team-member and telepathically crowed in amused triumph, 'The freckled humanoid didn't suspect for a moment our telepathic natures.'

'He was easily manipulated,' concurred his minion.

'With their Time Lord technology we will at long last be able to achieve our dreams of galactic conquest; we will swarm throughout time and obliterate all who would stand against us.'

'For long ages we have worked behind the scenes, masterfully manipulating galactic events, steering the politics of a thousand worlds with the power of our thoughts, but now the time has come to act openly,' agreed the other, darker-hued Amentethys.

In their telepathic communion, they felt their thoughts blending together; they drew strength from each other's confidence, bolstering their determination to proceed in an upward spiral of self-congratulatory reinforcement. And the Lorq, obsessive though they were at spying on anyone and everyone, did not have the means to snoop on these silent thought-exchanges. Which was only fair, given that the Amentethys couldn't, for some frustrating reason, read Lorq minds.

They knew the Lorq would have been listening in to their more conventional conversation with the humanoid – the Lorq eavesdropped on everything – but they had been counting on it. The Chief Negotiator had been certain from the beginning that the Doctor would never agree to their offer – Turlough had certainly thought so, his mind an open book to them. But Turlough wouldn't get five paces beyond the hatchway before being arrested – he certainly wouldn't be of any further help to the Amentethys: at least, not in the way he'd anticipated. Any moment now the Lorq would send troops to evict the negotiating contingent – thus giving the Amentethys the political excuse to retaliate that they had been waiting for. This entire manoeuvre had been nothing more than a skilled provocation to force the Lorq to make the first hostile move.

When the Amentethys sprung their surprise, the Lorq wouldn't last an hour – and

the races of the galactic hub wouldn't have any grounds to dispute the legality of their actions during the interval the Amentethys would be vulnerable to attack, the period it would take them to incorporate the temporal weapons into their own systems; it would all be a clear case of self-defence. Thanks to the delightfully gullible humanoid.

Naturally, the Amentethys had prepared much more than the hovering single-person tanks the aliens had seen thus far. Yet more plots within plots from the masters of political and military machination! The Chief Negotiator was rather pleased with himself. All was proceeding as planned now that the unexpected incident of the previous Key-holder's murder had been overcome – that had posed a short-term obstacle to the original stratagem of bargaining for what they wanted. But now everything was okay, they had found a way to fall back on their contingency plan: because the Amentethys always had contingencies prepared behind contingencies, back-up plans arranged like an infinite row of dominoes, stretching into the distant mist of the future where their inevitable victory lay.

∞

This is what Rorovalk 2 did not show his alternate – this is what he hid:

The healing atmosphere of the mountain retreat was pleasant indeed, thought the Cardinal; the air was redolent with the smell of roses and honeysuckle – these fragrances would remind the renegade of the world he now hated so much, but the Cardinal knew this was far from a coincidence. Lord Cardinal Abani was not upset by the sweet perfumes, lacking as he did the unpleasant associations; in fact, he rather enjoyed them. They were, of course, continuously working on the Savant in these subtle ways, adding to the fractured, incestuous thoughts that polluted his mind, all the while doing so in a manner that would ensure observers thought only that they had the patient's best interests at hearts.

He was coming to check up on Rorovalk's progress with the renegade, to see if the man – once so promising to the upper echelons of society – was ready for his new role in life.

The three of them sat in an open-aired quadrangle, sipping herbal infusions and listening to the droning sounds of the harmless flying insects. Rorovalk looked insufferably pleased with himself.

The Savant stared fixedly off into space, his face weighed down with uncountable woes – the perfumed cues from the Earth vegetation doing their work on his subconscious, no doubt. Cardinal Abani could see he was wearing a new outfit, so different from anything he'd chosen before – a good indicator of his present state of mind. The jacket was of sheerest black, the lapels trimmed with a glistening material; the trousers matched his shirt, a charcoal-grey: austere and unforgiving; and as for the footwear: dark boots – practical,

un-aesthetic blocks; all in all these elements combined to form an ensemble that was devoid of any of his customary élan.

'And how are you feeling?' asked the Cardinal with his best approximation of concern.

'I am well,' snapped the Savant. 'My flesh is healed, although my new features do not suit my preferences. I have been saddled with the face of an addled-brained poltroon.'

'Perhaps we can assist with your next regeneration, when the time comes, to sculpt a more pleasing appearance.'

The Savant fidgeted in his chair, possessed by a surfeit of nervous energy.

The Cardinal continued, 'I am forced to report that the War Council has impounded your vehicle. Alas, you are no longer free to travel as you would wish throughout time and space – unless –' He let the words trail off.

He had hooked the Savant's interest. 'Unless what?'

Expansively, the Cardinal offered, 'Unless you were willing to make certain accommodations, in return for which we would make certain allowances.'

'If you scratch our back . . .' added Rorovalk helpfully.

The Savant muttered bitterly, apparently forgetting that he wasn't alone, 'If only there had been more room to stretch, I could have used my own blood to write out block transfer equations in the darkness, I could have doubled back along my time-line and warned my earlier self, but there was never enough room, and my muscles soon ceased to function properly; curse the humans for interring me in a living tomb, I could have been trapped for all eternity, buried alive . . . '

Coughing tactfully, the Cardinal succeeded in bringing the Savant back to the here and now. Once he remembered he had company, the Savant had the decency to look embarrassed by his slip. Irked by his own weakness, he growled, 'And what would you have me do? What would earn for me my freedom and a new TARDIS?'

Rorovalk replied enthusiastically, 'Actually, that's an interesting question. The Matrix scanned a possible alternate continuum in which you were despatched to terminate an incident on Heracletus, but as there doesn't seem to be any incident there in our reality, the need for that mission has not arisen – a strange phenomenon to be sure; it was as if the crisis averted itself.'

Cardinal Abani broke into his subordinate's flow here, interjecting, 'But we have something near Heracletus we would like you to attend to, something involving a rare confluence of two factors: a Lorq vault ship and an Amentethys delegation. Both vessels have cargo that is useful enough singly, but in combination – well, let's just say it throws up some interesting strategic possibilities. This convergence of events is in an alternate

continuum – as Rorovalk indicated, we scan them regularly for data that might be to our advantage.'

'And if I go there and do whatever it is that you want? Will you then allow me to roam infinity and do as I wish?' queried the Savant.

'On a tight leash, as long as you continue to be of use from time to time. But first, you must prove your value to us.'

The Savant nodded. 'So be it. Tell me the particulars of the mission.'

∞

Turlough was soaked through to the skin and thrown violently into a rusted corner in one of the Lorq's foul-smelling passageways. Around him lay the equally bedraggled forms of the Lorq that had been sent to arrest him after his audience with the Amentethys, the nearest one to him the familiar form of his erstwhile minder, Ushnah. Groggily, they dragged themselves to their feet, taking in the details of the force that had overwhelmed them, blasting the entire group literally off its feet.

'Did they flood the tunnel?' gasped Turlough.

Ushnah growled throatily, 'They certainly tried.'

Puddles of viscous green liquid still sloshed around their feet, draining slowly into the bowels of the ship.

Shortly after being arrested, Turlough had witnessed a large phalanx of battle-armoured Lorq marching past, clearly heading for the hanger where the Amentethys were housed. From their vantage point inside the tubular corridor leading to the hanger's hatchway, Turlough's group had watched, transfixed by the unfolding events, as the heavily armed phalanx had taken up position around the environmental tank. In short order, the captain of this Lorq contingent had ordered the Amentethys to leave the vault ship and return to their own. Getting no response other than sullen silence, his temper had quickly frayed and a volley of warning shots had been fired at the armoured tank.

Retribution had been stunningly swift. Releasing several huge seals on their tank, the Amentethys had sent a tsunami of fluid crashing through the hanger and into the access tunnel, sending everyone flying like bowling pins, brutally ending the Lorq's attack, and causing Turlough and his guards to wind up where they'd landed, in crumpled, dishevelled heaps several metres away.

'Why would they empty out their water?' asked Turlough in bewilderment. 'Don't they need it to live?'

The answer to this question was not long in coming. A second flood poured forth from the tank, this one made up of floating Amentethys wearing rubbery suits hung with

anti-gravs and weapons pods (Turlough dubbed them 'drysuits' rather than wetsuits, as they performed the opposite function, keeping the water in rather than out), and along with them came a hard-shelled swarm of six-legged pincer-waving crabs, each one the size of Turlough's torso. This wasn't the end of the invading hordes, for with them skittered and clacked a profusion of enormous sea scorpions, as large as the prehistoric water-breathing monsters that had hunted the sea beds of Earth long before the dinosaurs.

Each of these fearsome apparitions was equipped with a reservoir of water to breathe, not dissimilar in design to a deep-sea diver's oxygen tank. Their progress was in no way random, the hovering Amentethys seemingly driving their ground troops before them with soundless commands – were they telepathic, wondered Turlough? That would explain their control over these beasts, but – oh, if they could read minds then they'd known all along he'd never meant to keep his bargain.

The crabs seemed to serve as the hands of the Amentethys, endowed as they were with opposable digits on their multi-segmented pincers; they performed all the delicate tasks the dolphin-analogues could not, undoubtedly directed in these duties by telepathy. This explained how a race that couldn't grasp anything in their flippers could develop an advanced industrial infrastructure. Really, Turlough should have expected some sort of symbiotic relationship like this the moment he'd clapped eyes on the Amentethys' physiognomy.

'We never scanned those animals inside their environmental pod!' exclaimed Ushnah in abject horror.

Turlough snorted. 'Surprise. Looks like they were blocking your scans and feeding you false readings.'

The Lorq tried to fight but the scorpions were unstoppable; ursine body parts flew in all directions, bone and gristle sheared into grizzly chunks by the razor-sharp pincers of the shock troops. If this wasn't enough, the crab-servitors poured onto the injured, finishing the job, while above them, the swooping Amentethys let loose volley after devastating volley of beam weapon fire. Turlough and Ushnah watched this slaughter mutely, shocked to their cores: after several seconds Ushnah turned to him.

'Are you with us?' he asked desperately.

'I thought I was under arrest.'

Ushnah drew a sidearm and thrust it into Turlough's hands. 'We are beyond such petty considerations now. If you stand alone you will be destroyed in moments, the target of both sides. Your only hope is to fight alongside us.'

Wondering how he always wound up in situations like this, Turlough replied bitterly, 'It looks like I'm a member of your army, then.' Somehow, he doubted this was the smartest move he'd ever made, but there didn't seem to be a whole lot of alternatives

– and he was farther than ever from rescuing the Doctor.

'Fall back!' screamed Ushnah to the other Lorq. 'Try to create a barricade on the next level – we have to stop them getting to the vault!'

∞

'You seem to be in a pickle, Key-holder,' observed the Doctor.

'Do not make me regret bringing you here to the Council Chamber,' the Lorq leader shot back. 'For if I do, I will not hesitate to bring your execution forward.' Things were going so badly, the Key-holder hadn't even touched the meal of raw fish a servant had just brought to him.

Still shackled like a common criminal, the Doctor looked about the chamber, at the panicked advisors, at the changing displays on the status screens, and at the rising sense of defeat. He could see from the displays that the Lorq were under attack from some race called the Amentethys – hang on, the Amentethys? – surely not. Were the Lorq so foolish as to let a species as devious as them on their ship? The Amentethys were invariably imperialistic, seeking only to tighten their grip on galactic power. Their presence here added another element to what was going on: an element that could reveal the truth. He could hear the advisors muttering amongst themselves about a deal gone sour – they'd been negotiating with those telepathic maniacs?

The fighting had now spread throughout at least half of the tower that made up the inhabited portion of the vault ship. It seemed the Lorq were being forced back deck-by-deck, unable to halt the invading horde's advance.

Shocked, the Doctor caught Turlough's name in a burst of radio traffic – what in the blue blazes? The boy was fighting on the Lorq's side? He really could be the most contrary sort, mused the Time Lord, loathe to engage in anything that smacked of danger one moment and then up to his neck in open warfare the next: quixotic didn't come into it. From the status report, it seemed the unit Turlough was with had been ordered to make a counter-strike against the Amentethys' ship: an attempt to make them open a second front and split their resources – frankly, the Doctor doubted it was going to work.

He ventured calmly, 'You know, it might be more use to try and work out what the Savant is up to. I've been wracking my brains in pokey over it, but without more information –'

'Oh, not this Savant again,' spat the Key-holder. 'Will you never tire of prattling about him? He isn't real, Doctor. He's a figment of your fevered imagination – a diversion to distract us from the truth of your guilt.'

Ignoring him, the Doctor continued blithely, 'You know, I doubt the Savant

realised the old Key-holder's quarters were bugged. I bet he never expected that. And if you hadn't hidden spy cameras in your leader's room – if you weren't so paranoid about someone stealing your treasure you didn't even trust your own leaders – you would never have known it was a humanoid that committed the murder. Under those circumstances, it would have been reasonable for the Savant to assume you would hold the Amentethys responsible and with you at each other's throats the items they were originally offering in exchange would have been left relatively unprotected. That's what the Savant was after! He was trying to get you to attack each other so he could more easily rob the Amentethys' ship!' The Doctor sounded ecstatic – he was sure he'd got it.

The Lorq leader listened with growing interest as the Doctor continued.

'The over-complicated machinations of the Amentethys have made them play directly into the Savant's hands. I bet they don't even know about him – they can't have factored him into their schemes. By committing so many troops to this assault on your vault, they've left their own craft vulnerable!'

'I know,' replied the Key-holder as if he were talking to a dullard. 'That's why we're attacking it.'

The Doctor shook his head in frustration. 'No, no, if the Savant's still there, your men and Turlough are in appalling danger. He won't hesitate to kill them.'

'They can't be in any danger from something that doesn't exist,' insisted the Key-holder stubbornly.

Changing the subject completely, the Doctor asked bluntly, 'What did the Amentethys originally offer? What could have been so valuable that it would have persuaded you to give up that which you have protected for so long?'

The Lorq's leader answered sadly, 'They offered us the only thing we would ever be interested in, the means to reconstruct our long-dead home world, Doctor. They offered us our home, complete in every detail, a perfect replica.'

'Now that's quite a promise. What was their price for this astonishing piece of construction? What is it that you hide so devotedly in your vaults?'

The Key-holder wagged a finger at him. 'I will never divulge that secret, Doctor. The attacks upon us would increase a thousand-fold if the peoples of the universe knew that.'

'Humour me. You're going to vaporise me in a few hours, what harm could telling me do?'

The Lorq considered his point, seeing the sense of it. 'Very well, if you must know, we are the protectors of the last few surviving remnants of our original civilisation; we are the scattered curators of their ancient technology. In our vault, Doctor, lies a technological treasure-trove the likes of which few beings have ever seen, and chief amongst our

ancestors' achievements, the one discovery that drives our persecutors berserk with lust and greed above anything else, is temporal control. That is what the Amentethys wanted, Doctor: they wanted time travel.'

The Doctor stared at him, brows deeply furrowed, and said indignantly, ' – '

∞

The Savant swam lithely through the flooded, green-hued corridors on the Amentethys' ship, heading for their main cargo area. The brackish twists and turns of the architecture were deserted, most of the crew standing at battle stations or assigned to the spearhead assaulting the vault ship. He was unopposed as he placed a series of flat, lethal-looking devices on the internal bulkheads, his pitch-black figure-hugging suit shielding him from the environmental conditions as much as the craft's motion sensors. These limpet-like devices of his would undoubtedly come in handy later, he thought with relish.

In no time he came to the Amentethys' vault, a pale shadow of the one guarded by the Lorq but still large enough to house the Empire State building, the locks on the hatch falling to his unbounded intellect in seconds. The alarms bypassed, the hatch swung open without undue event, revealing the contents that lay within. The Savant smiled at the skyscraper-sized planet-builder, a series of modular matter reorganisers and vast computer banks, but his smirk soon faltered.

He swam inside the cavernous interior, taking a closer look. Laughing to himself he did as he'd been bid, using a power-boosted transmit to send the enormous machine to his controllers. In moments the chamber was empty, the water shifting tumultuously as the fluid filled the vacant space. Still chuckling to himself, the Savant likewise disappeared; another, lesser, swirl in the emerald eddies of the ship's internal sea the only sign that he'd ever been there.

∞

Turlough detested the wetsuit he was forced to wear as part of the operation. He hated the way it chafed his elbows and knees, and he particularly hated the empty lower arm-sections that flapped around as he swam, getting in his way: but as Ushnah had said, it wasn't their fault Turlough lacked a second pair of arms, and there wasn't any reason for the Lorq to keep human-patterned wetsuits on hand. He'd been lucky to get one large enough to fit; bearing in mind most Lorq only came up to his waist.

The battle to board the Amentethys' delta wing shaped vessel had been fierce indeed, and many Lorq had died in the attempt. But now they were here, scorching

crab-servitors and scorpions as they swam, their beam weapons functioning adequately underwater. More Lorq fell to the agile, bullet-fast Amentethys as several of them swept past, slamming their thick tails into the relatively defenceless bodies of the bear-analogues, crushing bone and flesh effortlessly: the dolphins had the advantage here.

Forced to abandon their push to the control deck, Turlough's group found themselves passing the main cargo hold, the area where the Amentethys should have been storing their offering to the Lorq. But they could see the huge room lay open, the hatch unlocked, the interior ransacked.

This changed things. With the planet-builder gone, there was nothing to prevent the Lorq from firing the main ship-cannons at the Amentethys' vessel. Ushnah hurriedly informed the vault ship of their discovery over his communications link, and they began an evacuation, heading back to the vault ship as fast as they could manage.

As they fled, something caught Turlough's eye. 'Wait!' he gasped. 'Just give me a second.' And in an uncharacteristic display of bravado, he went back for what he'd seen.

∞

'You will cease your contemptible slander!' roared the Key-holder, almost giving into his urge to rip off the Doctor's face. The Lorq's claws were fully extended, bared for battle: the Doctor's life hung in the balance.

Without warning, klaxons screeched into life, unleashing a discordant alarm throughout the Council Chamber. 'Something wrong?' enquired the Doctor mildly, his manners impeccable no matter what the provocation.

'The vault is compromised,' shrieked the Key-holder, his anger at the Doctor's claims now forgotten. 'Someone has penetrated all our defences – but I don't understand. The Amentethys are not yet there: who could it be?'

'Use your ubiquitous cameras,' suggested the Time Lord, and unable to deny his prisoner's logic, the Lorq did just that. The cameras in the city-sized vault showed a humanoid stepping through the wide-open entranceway: a reinforced circular plug of steel fifty feet high. Zooming in on his features, the surveillance monitor revealed the thief's identity; to the Key-holder's astonishment it was a man identical in appearance to the Doctor: only the clothes differed. The Lorq could hardly believe what they were seeing.

'Hey presto, the Savant!' announced the Doctor. 'And look, he's robbing you.'

'More future crimes of yours, Doctor?' queried the Key-holder, but everyone could tell the Lorq was rattled.

'Oh, use your eyes. There's an aura to him, a certain cast to his expression that you would never see on my face. He's plainly a doppelgänger and not a future version of

me. It's time to admit that I've been telling the truth all along – my innocence has been proven by the same cameras that earlier indicated my guilt. Now there's a nice symmetry.'

Before the Key-holder could cave in completely, an advisor gingerly approached him and reported on the discovery made on the Amentethys ship.

'My, the Savant has been busy,' remarked the Doctor, rattling his manacles meaningfully for the second time that day, hoping against hope that his captors would take the hint this time.

'Yes, release him,' ordered the leader of the Lorq. 'Forgive my mistake, Doctor. I genuinely believed you were guilty. Now I face the ignominy of asking for your help in stopping the Savant, the real murderer; clearly there is some connection between you two – if you are alter-egos, you may be the best person to foil your doppelgänger's plans.'

As his shackles fell to the ground, the Doctor replied generously, 'I would be happy to put a stop to his crimes.'

∞

The Doctor watched the Lorq's final defences crumble and the Amentethys sweep through into the vault's antechamber. They came in waves, scorpions scuttling over walls, clinging to the ceiling ducting, crabs following in their wake, pincers snip-snip-snipping, and last of all, hovering on their anti-gravs entered the dolphin-analogues themselves, weapons pods spurting orange lances of death.

The ursine Lorq warriors fell into disarray, their ranks fracturing, and the screams of their dying and injured reverberated around the hall. Driven to this last extremity, pushed back to the gigantic open metal vault door itself, there was nowhere left to fall back to.

Turlough stood on the Doctor's left, the Key-holder on his right. Reunited with his travelling companion on the way to the antechamber, the Doctor and Turlough had brought each other up to speed. Now they gazed down on the horror of warfare from the lofty vantage point of the chamber's upper balcony.

The time had come to act, to stop all this carnage.

'Stop firing!' roared the Doctor at the top of his lungs. 'Everyone cease fire immediately!' Such was the authority in his voice that the warring aliens actually paused, the fighting spluttering to a halt.

In the sudden, unexpected silence, an albino Amentethys that Turlough recognised as the Chief Negotiator shouted up at them, 'And who are you to order us?'

The Doctor descended to the floor of the antechamber, stepping regally down the spiral staircase until he stood before the dolphin-like creature. 'I am the Doctor,' he said pointedly.

'Ah, Doctor, we promised your friend we would rescue you. Is that service no longer required?'

'I doubt you ever really meant to go through with it,' he retorted. 'I know your kind – you are ruthless manipulators; your entire culture is built on coercing others to do your bidding.'

'True,' conceded the Chief Negotiator. 'But we only ever coerce lower life-forms, I assure you.'

'Is that so?'

'Of course, compared to us, everyone is a lower life-form.'

'And there we have it,' he sighed. 'Your hubris is finally revealed.'

'Why have you asked for this ceasefire?' questioned the Amentethys. 'Explain yourself.'

'I'll do more than that: I'll explain everything.' His voice grew increasingly excited, carrying to all the corners of the echoing room. 'I'll explain why all of this is pointless. I'll bare everyone's petty little secrets.'

A competing voice boomed out from within the canyon-expanse of the vault, stealing the Doctor's thunder. 'Yes, please do, Doctor. I would find it amusing.' The voice's owner strutted up a ramp onto the tall, silvery jamb of the hatchway, standing there proudly.

'May I introduce the Savant,' said the Doctor with evident distaste. To the Chief Negotiator, he added, 'This is the individual responsible for stealing your planet-builder.'

Before the audible gasps of the Amentethys could turn into violence, the Savant cried loudly, his voice booming arrogantly throughout the chamber, 'But don't think it a crime. I assure you, that machine was a fake, clumsily constructed and obviously worthless to my educated eyes, I could tell it in an instant and so could have any planetary engineer worth his salt; the Amentethys are trying to offload nothing more than junk on the Lorq, presumably as part of a massive con.' He winked at the Negotiator. 'How terribly naughty of you.'

'I – I – I dispute the veracity of this claim,' stammered the Amentethys.

'Of course you do,' purred the Savant. 'I would expect nothing less.'

The Key-holder cried out in dismay, 'But they provided us with samples of the merchandise at the start of our negotiations . . .'

'Yes, they were the only truly valuable bits of technology the dolphins ever had – the rest was absolute rubbish,' averred the Savant willingly, happily spreading the bad news.

'But the Amentethys aren't the only ones to lose their treasure, are they?' stated the Doctor, already guessing the answer.

'No, I have taken the liberty of removing the contents of this vault too. And I must thank our friendly dolphins for drawing away all the guards, thus making my mission so much easier,' boasted the Savant.

'Our treasure – gone?' shrieked the Key-holder in consternation. 'Tell me it isn't true! Oh, woe, that our race should come to this dreadful pass, our last link with our ancestors gone forever – '

'Give it a rest, you're not convincing anyone,' complained the Doctor, remembering the conversation he'd had with the Key-holder earlier.

'That is what the Amentethys wanted, Doctor: they wanted time travel.'

The Doctor stared at him, brows deeply furrowed, and said indignantly, 'You deceitful swine – if your ancestors developed time travel then I'm a Chinaman's uncle. I've never heard such blatant hogwash in all my lives.'

Loudly, the Doctor called out to the assembled creatures, 'The Lorq don't have time travel. They never have. I knew from what happened with the Spline on the nearby world of Heracletus that the Lorq never really had temporal control – that had only ever been an illusion, images reflected around an alien world using elements drawn from my TARDIS: the rumours of Lorq temporal superiority are just that – rumours, and nothing more. Ask yourselves, why would a race as secretive, as paranoid of attack as the Lorq, send an ambassador to Heracletus in the first place? The only reason I can think of is that they were advertising, dropping discreet hints, seeding those very rumours about the treasure they claimed to possess, laying the groundwork for a con just as crooked as the Amentethys'. Because if no-one knows about their great and glorious treasure then no-one will try and buy it.' He said more quietly to the Chief Negotiator, 'You've been had.'

The Lorq Key-holder blustered, 'This is sheer insanity! The vast value of our treasure is well known throughout the galaxy! We aren't the deceivers, they are.'

The Doctor, petulantly shushing the ursine creature every time it tried to open its mouth, halted any further attempt at mendacity.

'But we registered Cherenkov radiation on the vault ship,' insisted the Amentethys. 'It was proof they had something.'

The Savant shook his head pityingly. 'Oh dear, you really are terribly easy to gull. They faked the readings – just as you were faking the readings of what was inside your environmental tank. But don't be too embarrassed, you weren't the only ones taken in.'

'Yes,' agreed the Doctor, turning to the Savant. 'How does it feel to have stolen

two lots of faked treasure? Hardly the best day's work you've ever done, is it? Oh, I'm sorry, you must have stuck around to gloat, but you can hardly do that if I'm pointing out your errors too. It tarnishes the whole edifice of your vaunted superiority.'

'Please don't concern yourself with my superiority: it is entirely safe,' shot back the Savant. 'But you were right to say the Lorq treasure was nothing but a deception too – it was equally worthless.' The Savant bowed aristocratically to the Doctor, sarcastically congratulating him on his accuracy. 'Everything the Lorq did to protect it was an act to deceive the gullible races that've been chasing after this fool's gold for so long. Any treasure the Lorq once had has long since rotted away or been stolen in dribs and drabs over the centuries.'

The Doctor coughed and summarised the situation to the shocked ranks of the Lorq and Amentethys, trying as he did so to suppress a smile. 'As it turns out, your deal would actually have been a fair exchange, because one lot of tat is actually a perfectly reasonable price to pay for another load of old dross. By trying to cheat each other, all you've actually accomplished is to accidentally offer just terms, and to, ahem, inadvertently reveal to the cosmos just how pathetic you both are.'

The hall erupted into shouting and yelling.

Turlough shouted to the Doctor over the din, 'Funny how it turned out, isn't it? Everyone getting what they deserved. It's like one of those morality plays they have on Earth.'

The Doctor looked thoughtful. 'Given that both the Lorq and Amentethys are nothing more than con artists, immorality play might be more like it.'

'That's terrible,' said Turlough and the Savant simultaneously, much to each other's irritation.

'Besides,' added the Doctor, 'I can think of at least one person here who hasn't yet got what he deserves.' His words hung in the air, dripping volumes of unspoken meaning as the two physically identical Time Lords glared balefully at each other.

∞

The Savant finished stowing his equipment in his TARDIS and turned back to the Cardinal, clipping a small atmospheric analyser to his wrist as he did so – he was allergic to certain gases in this physically feeble incarnation and it was simple prudence to guard against their presence when venturing into the field. 'What happens to me if the Time Lords of the other reality detect my incursion?'

Cardinal Abani smiled assuredly. 'There will be no problem. Rorovalk will wait until they notify us – they are hidebound by their ridiculous rules, thinking in their stultified

intellectual comas that we similarly care for right and wrong – and then we will retroactively issue a warning to them, alerting them to your presence. Only, we will know that they already know about you.'

'What does that achieve?'

The Cardinal laughed nastily. 'Because their rules say we're the ones who'll bring you back and punish you. And once you're back under our protection, you will be beyond their reach.'

'So much for the rules,' noted the Savant.

'Personally, I think they're hilarious,' chortled the Cardinal.

∞

Recriminations were flying in the antechamber, the Lorq and the Amentethys angrily shouting at each other. At least it was better than shooting at each other.

The Doctor approached the Savant carefully, coming face-to-face with his duplicate and commenting, 'I think they realise that further slaughter would serve no useful purpose.'

'There is always a purpose to slaughter,' countered the Savant instantly.

The Doctor looked him up and down as if he were a scientific specimen. 'How thoroughly warped you are. What could have happened to cause you?'

'I woke up and realised the futility of my ways. You should do the same.'

'Oh, I'd rather not. Still, I have to say, you're filled with an impressive confidence – here we are, surrounded by armed soldiers and all manner of ravening beasts and you're not even a bit concerned.'

'I have no reason to be concerned, Doctor.'

'Oh and why is that?' he asked innocently.

'I am supremely confident that all the surprises I have prepared will get me safely out of this situation.'

'Ah, yes, surprises: do tell.'

'Certainly – I will enjoy seeing the look on your face when I tell you what I've done; there are explosive devices planted throughout both ships, Doctor: and in revenge for being doubly deceived by both of these duplicitous races I will detonate them, thus gaining my revenge.'

Smiling in avuncular manner, the Doctor replied, 'Oh yes, how could I have forgotten your revenge? Most absent-minded of me.'

His equanimity seemed to provoke the Savant to further heights of hyperbole. 'I will kill you all, Doctor, safe behind my personal force field. Once the dust settles, I will

traverse a tesseract back to my Ship and depart your feeble-minded reality for good.'

'Gosh, that sounds thoroughly calamitous. Well, if I'm going to die, I'd better say good-bye. So, um, toodle-pip.'

The Doctor gave him a little, coquettish wave just as Turlough arrived at his side, catching the end of this exchange. 'Is he leaving?' he asked artlessly.

'Yes, but he's going to kill us first,' clarified the Doctor.

'Oh, how inconvenient. I'd hoped to get home one day,' opined Turlough phlegmatically.

'You are the most insufferable fools I have ever encountered!' ranted the Savant, pressing the detonator.

Absolutely nothing happened.

Annoyed, the Savant pressed the trigger switch a couple more times, quickly resorting to thumping it against his palm.

Turlough coughed, mentioning in an off-hand manner, 'I happened to spot some anachronistic Time Lord devices when I was raiding the other ship – and I removed them. Thought they looked a bit dangerous.'

The Doctor coughed too, explaining regretfully to his alternate, 'As I was working out what you were likely to get up to, I realised you'd plant bombs to kill everyone – it's a pretty standard ploy to be honest – you must have been stuck in a cave for the last several lives not to have realised that, so I instructed the new Lorq leader to sniff them out and remove them, hence my delayed arrival at the entrance to the vault – the Council Chamber's only just down the corridor, after all.'

He added, ever the spirit of helpfulness, 'When I bumped into Turlough just outside the antechamber, we compared notes and decided where to put the explosive devices – and it's a place you're not going to like.'

'Why is that?' asked the Savant reluctantly.

'Well, on my way here, I also took the time to detect the location of your TARDIS, and guess what? That's where all the bombs have gone. By trying to blow everyone up, you've only managed to ruin the inside of your own time-ship, stranding yourself here. Still, I imagine that force field of yours will come in handy. Wish I had one at times, I'll say. And here was me thinking that sort of kit only came with the blessing of the High Council.'

The Doctor's gaze had hardened. 'Did you say something about a mission?' And when the Savant didn't reply, he went on, 'As you can tell, I'm not the imbecile you think I am.'

'I will excoriate you, Doctor: I will flay you alive. Sooner or later, the time will come. Spend the rest of your lives looking over your shoulder because one day I will be there, knife at the ready, waiting to plunge it into your hearts.' The expression on the

Savant's face was terrible to behold.

'That's nice,' said the Doctor cheerfully. 'How about Wednesdays? I'm generally free on Wednesdays, although you'll have to take your turn after all the other lunatics queuing up to do me in.'

Turlough raised his hand. 'Can you hear that?'

He was right: there was a tone, a sound like a choir – a wave front operating in multiple dimensions, and it was coming closer. The air was turning to sludge, making movement difficult.

Face rigid, the Doctor barked, 'We're leaving now, Turlough. Back to the TARDIS and don't dawdle. I really don't want to talk to them.'

The boy called after the Doctor's fleeing form, 'But what about the Savant?'

'They'll take care of him!' he shouted back, his voice tinged with fear.

Turlough left the Savant standing there; it left a bad taste in his mouth but unsatisfactory resolution or not, once again his options had been reduced to one: flight. Running away was something he was getting sick of.

∞

Rorovalk 1 and Rorovalk 2 stepped out of the gateway, looking with interest at the frozen statues of the Lorq and Amentethys. The Savant was immune to the slow-time bubble, protected as he was by his force field.

'We are here to place you under arrest,' announced the 'real' Rorovalk.

'Yes, I anticipated as much,' replied the Savant sanguinely.

'Now, you may think that you were going back to your own reality –' began Rorovalk 1.

'What?' exploded the other Rorovalk and the Savant at the same time.

'Yes, there's been a change of plans, I'm afraid. Cardinal Abani – that would be the Abani of *my* reality, of course, has indicated to me that your cooperation was not all it seemed, dear alternate Rorovalk. It shocked me to find out that your motives were not pure. In fact, I am so disappointed in you that I'm going to arrest you too.'

'Now hang on –'

His protestation was interrupted by the Savant screaming at him, 'You promised me immunity! You said I'd be sent back home and let off! That's the only reason I stuck around waiting for this utter nobody, this bureaucrat, to turn up. I could have made a run for it!'

Rorovalk 1 continued grimly, 'There is an arrangement between all the Gallifreys. No interference in the affairs of an alternate Gallifrey is permitted – by enforcing this

arrangement we prevent chaos. But your Gallifrey is out of control – your War Council has targeted the other Gallifreys for destruction.'

'Because they are inferior and deserve to be wiped out!' screamed Rorovalk 2, condemning himself with his own words.

Rorovalk 1 answered coldly, 'You fools: you're nothing more than jumped-up Ferutu. Did you seriously imagine no one from an alternate reality has tried this before? Your schemes will not bear fruit. We knew all about your plan to take possession of a planet-builder and an unlicensed time machine native to this continuum. In conjunction, these two devices – if they had been real – could have been used to go back in time and reengineer the very fabric of the primordial home world, utterly eradicating our entire history, and with the utilisation of technology native to this continuum, the other Gallifreys would have been left with nothing to trace back to your reality. So, you see, we know all the particulars of your invidious plan. But you forget. When you operate here, you're on our territory and we are always one step ahead of you: ask yourselves, who made such useless, unworkable junk so attractive to you, who gave it the patina of respectability? Who led you to this vault ship?'

Rorovalk saw the realisation dawn on their faces and smiled in self-satisfaction. 'The trap has been sprung, and your guilt will be used to prove the odious ambitions of your War Council to every Gallifrey in the omniverse! Wanting to be the one, true Gallifrey, indeed! There are no limits to your insanity.' He added, almost wistfully, 'After all, everyone knows we're the one, true Gallifrey.' And with that, he signalled his superiors that he was ready.

Screaming, Rorovalk 2 and the Savant were ripped out of space-time, flung into the deepest pits of the Citadel's punishment sector on Gallifrey – the real Gallifrey, Rorovalk reminded himself.

The incident being over, he released the slow-time bubble. Immediately he was bombarded with questions from the assembled aliens. Seeing no harm in it, he tried to explain the fate of the criminal renegade – he supposed they deserved to know that much, wondering as he did so where the Doctor had got to.

∞

'Well, here we are,' said Turlough, standing next to the TARDIS console. 'Right back where we were before all this started.' He scratched his nose as the Time Lord busied himself at the controls. 'Don't suppose you'd like to explain why we ran away?'

'It was my people, Turlough: the Time Lords.'

'What's so terrible about that? We've run into them before. They wouldn't have

been too annoyed to see you, surely?'

The Doctor paused in his frenetic dance of setting levers and turning dials and said in a small voice, 'I caught a telepathic glimpse of their intentions – and of everything they knew. It was enough to convince me that running was the best option.'

'What happened? What did they do to the Savant?' asked Turlough nervously, not at all sure he wanted to hear the answer now.

'They've put him in a deep, dark cell, Turlough. One almost the same as the one he languished in, alone and screaming, in the beginning, when his mind broke and he stopped being me and became the Savant; he has exchanged one horror for another – and it's all his own fault, the result of his murderous actions.' The Doctor shook himself, his flesh covered in sweat. 'Everyone got what they deserved: they tried so hard to outmanoeuvre each other and get the upper hand, but all they achieved in the end was to unwittingly make exchanges that turned out to be entirely fair despite the worst intentions of everyone involved. But pity the Savant, Turlough, because there but for the grace of God . . . '

He looked down at the gently humming controls and didn't speak again for some time.

∞

The Key-holder of the Lorq stared appraisingly at the Chief Negotiator of the Amentethys as their peoples crowded about the Time Lord agent: the Key-holder was desperate to get something out of this farce – and he knew there had to be a way, or he wasn't the best fanged, four-armed ursine con artist in the galaxy. He cleared his throat and ventured, 'We could join forces, try to con this Time Lord fellow out of his technology: he looks like nothing more than an inexperienced cub.'

The albino Amentethys mulled over the proposition. 'It would be a shame to come out of this with nothing,' he agreed. 'What did you have in mind?'

'A map to ancient treasure, perhaps – unless you think that's too gauche? He looks naive enough never to have heard of that scam.'

'Yes, that might work. We can shield you against his mind powers; yes, we can still achieve our goals here. The galaxy will bow down before us!'

'And by "us", you mean the Amentethys and the Lorq, right?'

'Yes, yes, naturally. That is precisely what I meant,' the dolphin-analogue hastily clarified.

They went over to the floppy-haired youth, and noted how he was attentively listening to their peoples' claims and stories with evident interest.

This was going to be easy.

STAR
BUCKS
COFFEE
AND
BOARD

Return On Investment

Rachel Steffan

I grew up in the seventies and eighties as an American fan of Doctor Who. *Along with fans everywhere, I mourned its loss at the end of the Sylvester McCoy era. When the Virgin* New Adventures *novels appeared, it was like a gift from above; still, as much as I enjoyed them, I missed the older (younger?) Doctors – the Doctors of my childhood. So, in 1994, how happy was I when Virgin announced the* Missing Adventures *line? And how much happier, still, when two of the early* MA*s featured Peter Davison's Doctor (whom I did not remotely have a huge crush on when I was, like, twelve)?*

Goth Opera *by Paul Cornell was a terrific piece of fiction. But when, in* The Crystal Bucephalus*, Craig Hinton stripped the 'Oncoming Beige' of his cricketing whites and dressed him in embroidered blue silk, complete with the always-slightly-too-long hair in a ponytail, I was an instant devotee.*

Yes, I am that shallow. (Sorry, Craig.)

However, as you might expect, there was more to the novel than just that lovely mental picture. Craig also introduced the hysterically funny idea that the Doctor was constantly battling the unseemly accumulation of unintended wealth, which comes with time travel and a ridiculously long life span, by attempting to lose money in hopelessly doomed investments. While this is a side note in the novel, I have chosen to use it as the focus of my little homage to Craig, Return On Investment. *I have also chosen to write for the Sixth Doctor, portrayed by the wonderful Colin Baker; a Doctor whom both Craig and I enjoyed immensely despite his relative lack of popularity.*

This one's for you, Craig, from an American fan who misses you deeply.

Bishopsgate, 1994

Any minute now, an alien is gonna burst out of this guy's stomach, Peri thought, as she eyed the impossibly fat, smug banker seated across the conference room table. Said banker eyed her right back – lecherously – and she hunched down further in the leather-upholstered seat, once again pretending to take notes as the speaker at the front of the room droned on about 'derivatives trading' and 'exciting opportunities in south east Asia.'

Time ticked by with no sign of any alien stomach-bursting behaviour, and Peri gradually began to relax. Beside her, the Doctor appeared unconcerned and a bit bored; a figure faintly out of place, his sober three-piece suit at odds with the riot of curly blond hair and the small, gold cat-pin on his lapel.

She fidgeted, feeling equally misplaced in her tailored jacket and skirt.

These shoulder pads are going to have somebody's eye out. She glared briefly at her companion. *'Secretary', indeed... why, I oughtta...*

The Doctor shot her a quelling glance, and she subsided, returning to the list of ways to take revenge for this ridiculous, unexplained side-trip, which she was composing in lieu of actually taking notes.

Maybe this was really nothing more than what it seemed – an investor meeting at a pretentious old British bank. She supposed that even nine hundred-year-old Time Lords had to manage their investments sometime, and the Doctor obviously wasn't hurting for cash.

Still, it wouldn't have killed him to actually *tell* her that, instead of leaving her wondering if Sigourney Weaver was about to come crashing through the conference room door with guns blazing. With their lifestyle, Peri wouldn't have been surprised in the least... it was a testament to her experiences since travelling with the Doctor that the first thing she'd done upon entering the room was catalogue all the likely furnishings that could be used for cover if all hell broke loose.

Her attention turned outward again as the room's occupants began to stir. The young guy at the front – Leevy? Leavenson? Something like that – was gathering up his papers and moving away from the projector display. Break time, apparently.

The Doctor nudged her.

'Come along, Miss Brown. Let's step outside for a moment, shall we?'

'About time,' she muttered.

They worked their way around the edge of the room towards the large double doors, narrowly avoiding a collision with the young speaker. The Doctor reached out to steady him, murmuring apologies, then paused.

'Hang on. Don't I know you?'

The pale, harried-looking man gave him a quick once-over.

'I don't think so,' he replied, obviously intent on ending the encounter.

'No, wait. I'm sure I do – I never forget a face. Nick, isn't it? Used to work as a clerk at Coutt's in... what, the mid 80's? You took a deposit for me, once. My, my. Manager at the Singapore investment branch, now. Moving up in the world, aren't you?'

Nick's eyes darted to the side nervously.

'Er, yeah. Thanks. Small world, innit? Now, excuse me, I've just got to... ' He gestured vaguely toward the door.

'Oh. Yes, of course.' The Doctor stepped to the side. 'Sorry to keep you... '

But Nick had already gone.

'Strange chap,' he said, watching the man disappear through the door. 'Come on,

Peri.'

He led her out of the building, into the warm summer morning. They'd walked a couple of blocks when Peri finally asked the obvious question.

'Doctor, where are we going?'

'Back to the TARDIS, of course,' he replied.

'But...' She glanced back the way they'd come. 'The meeting wasn't over, was it?'

'I'd heard all I needed to hear. It wasn't a suitable investment.'

'It wasn't?' Peri thought over the part of the presentation that she'd listened to before she got bored. 'It sounded pretty reasonable to me.'

'Precisely.'

Okay . . . 'And that's bad, because – ?'

'Well, I'm hardly going to be able to lose significant money by purchasing reasonable investments, now am I?'

Peri blinked, and stopped walking.

'All right, back up a minute,' she said. 'Apparently, there's some vitally important piece of information I'm missing that would cause this conversation to actually make sense.'

The Doctor turned, impatient.

'Do try to keep up, Peri. One of the perils of time travel – not to mention a long life span – is that one tends to accumulate large amounts of wealth. Embarrassingly large amounts, in fact. It occasionally becomes necessary to prune back one's net worth, by maintaining a hideously unsuccessful investment portfolio full of doomed business ideas and unreliable securities.'

She searched his face for some sign that this was a joke.

'You're kidding, right? You're actually attending investor meetings, trying to find ways to lose money? Geez, Doctor, all you had to do was put my name on your bank account and give me a cheque book.'

The Doctor glanced briefly heavenward, as if for strength.

'Peri, how shall I put this? I'm afraid there aren't enough leotards and impractical shoes in this sector of the galaxy to make noticeable inroads on a problem of this size.'

'Care to put that to the test?' she muttered at his retreating back as he once more turned and headed back to the TARDIS. When he didn't answer, she hurried forward to catch up.

'Fine, fine,' she said, once more keeping pace with him. 'So why don't you just give it away to charity?'

'A noble sentiment. However, like consumerism, charitable giving doesn't make money disappear. It merely moves it from place to place, causing ripples and repercussions

through the time lines. No, the only way to make wealth disappear as if it had never existed is to invest it in bad ideas that collapse under the weight of their own complexity, and sink beneath the sands of time without a trace.'

The two of them rounded a corner and entered the alley where the TARDIS was parked. Something else occurred to Peri as the Doctor unlocked the door and ushered her in.

'Wouldn't it make things easier to use the TARDIS data banks to find failed companies, and invest in those?'

'"Use the TARDIS data banks?"' He whirled on her, voice rising in indignation.

Oh, great, she thought with a sigh. *Here we go...*

'What sort of Time Lord do you take me for? "Use the TARDIS data banks.", indeed! As if I, of all people, would use my knowledge of the future for personal gain!'

'Don't you mean "for personal loss"?' she asked, unable to resist.

'Whatever!' he snapped. 'I can't even read the financial section of the newspaper, for fear of gaining future knowledge of companies in which I one day might wish to invest! It flies in the face of the Laws of Time. You've no idea of the – '

' – damage it could do!' she chimed in, matching his tone perfectly.

'All right... sorry I even mentioned it. So, what's next?'

Mercurial as ever, he crossed to the console and began entering co-ordinates.

'I have two or three other ideas to investigate. Pity... when I heard about that scheme to expand futures trading on the Japanese stock index, it sounded suitably risky. Still, Barings Bank is far too venerable and conservative an institution to let young Nick Leeson lose any significant money at it. No doubt they'll be keeping a close eye on him, and reining him in if things get out of hand.'

Liverpool, 1720

'Do stop fidgeting, Peri.'

Peri ignored him, and continued her attempts to ease the itch which had taken up residence in the vicinity of her left boob.

'Look!' she groused. 'You don't have to walk around with Ace bandages wrapped around your chest so you can pass for a boy. Of all the ignorant, sexist, historical backwaters... '

'You're the one who insisted on coming, and you can't very well attend a business meeting in England of the 1720s dressed as a woman.' The Doctor cast her a look that was equal parts impatience and smugness. 'Now, we're here. So stop complaining and try not to act female. Come on.'

The company office was a study in luxury. Gleaming, dark wood and white marble surrounded them. Rich Persian rugs muffled their footsteps as they approached the front desk. The finely-dressed clerk looked up from his quill and parchment to give them his full attention.

'How may I help you, sir?' he asked.

The Doctor stepped forward and straightened to his full height.

'Dr RJ Smith, to see the manager. I have an appointment at ten o'clock, I believe.'

'Of course, sir. Mr Johnson is expecting you. Please follow me.' The young man rose and led them to a back room, just as opulent as the front office, if not more so. 'Mr Johnson? Your ten o'clock appointment, sir.'

A saggy, middle-aged man with bloodhound eyes moved forward to meet them.

'Dr Smith,' he said, extending his hand. 'A pleasure to finally meet you. Please, come and have a seat. You and your... apprentice?'

The Doctor returned the handshake.

'Yes. My apprentice. Percival Brown.'

'Hi.' Peri smiled and extended her hand, only to awkwardly withdraw it when the manager merely looked down his nose at her, unmoving.

'Er, yes,' the Doctor hurriedly interjected. 'Young Master Brown has expressed an interest in learning more about the affairs of business, so I thought it would be beneficial for him to attend this meeting. Perhaps we should begin?'

'Quite so, sir.' Mr Johnson waited for the Doctor to sit before seating himself. Unsure what to do, Peri awkwardly remained standing.

'I understand from our correspondence that you have a large sum of money which you wish to invest,' said the manager. 'The South Sea Company has some exciting opportunities for profit in the future – I'm sure a man of your intellect and wisdom can see that the prospects for growth are almost unlimited... '

'Indeed,' the Doctor interjected. 'However, I do have some questions. I see that your share price has risen from £100 to almost £1000 in a very short period of time.'

Mr Johnson's flabby features became animated with enthusiasm. 'Oh, yes, sir! Money in the bank for our investors! You can see why it is advisable to invest as soon as possible, to maximise your profits. The South Sea Company is an extremely successful venture, with no end in sight.'

The Doctor steepled his fingers in front of him. 'And yet, some might say that such a precipitous rise in stock price heralds an equally precipitous fall.'

'Only those without the means to invest, themselves – such slander stems from jealousy, nothing more! The company has an exclusive trade contract with the Spanish

colonies, which guarantees a bright future for all our shareholders.'

'Forgive me, Mr Johnson, but I understood that your business was mainly the repurchase of government debt instruments, not imports and exports,' said the Doctor. 'Tell me, what exactly does the South Sea Company trade? Spices? Textiles?'

'Slaves,' replied Johnson.

'*What?*' Peri squeaked, completely forgetting to lower her voice from its usual pitch.

Mr Johnson frowned at her. 'Negro slaves. From Africa. Very profitable business it is, too.'

Beside her, the Doctor slapped his palms down on the table with a sharp crack of noise.

'Of course, how absolutely *typical!* After all, why make money by providing people with products and services they need, when you can make it by trading in human flesh? Do you have any idea of the level of *depravity* that... oh, never mind. It isn't even worth the effort. Come along, Peri. Our business with this... ' He paused, dragging a cold gaze up and down Mr Johnson's squat frame as he searched for the appropriate word. '...*individual* is concluded.'

Johnson scrambled to regain his rich investor.

'I don't know what you may have heard about the slave trade in the past, Dr Smith,' he said swiftly, 'but let me assure you that the South Sea Company has been very successful in meeting its quotas... '

He followed the pair as they strode from the room.

'...and the mortality rate is only fifteen percent, which is extremely competitive!'

Peri looked back at him as they reached the main door.

'You're not helping your case, here, buster. How do you sleep at night?'

They left the chubby little manager standing in his front office, jowls flapping indignantly as he watched his fat commission cheque disappear into the distance.

The Doctor walked in stony silence, hands thrust deep into the pockets of his period coat.

'It's *horrible,*' Peri said quietly, thinking of all the lives ripped from their homes and families, dying on some stinking boat in the middle of the ocean.

'Profiting from human misery,' the Doctor agreed, his voice deep with disgust. 'And on such a scale. Sometimes it's hard to see why I care about this planet at all.'

Peri remained silent, unable to disagree with him just at the moment.

Eventually he looked down at her with sad, ancient eyes.

'Come along, Peri. Let's go somewhere a little more... civilised.'

Houston, 2001

Peri smothered her amusement as the Doctor attempted to dodge another round of back-slapping and down-home Texas *bonhomie*. After exchanging Ace bandages for underwires, she was once again relegated to the position of ersatz secretary. It was almost worth it, though, for the sight of the oh-so-British Doctor, resplendent in western-cut suit and bolo tie, up to his neck in loud, drawling Texans and giving off unmistakable 'I-don't-want-to-be-here' vibes.

From what she understood, they were here because several of the executives of this company were dumping large amounts of stock, even as the stock price seemed to be tanking. Apparently, these guys were in the business of futures trading, kind of like the guy at Barings Bank. But instead of stocks, they were trading things like electricity, and natural gas, and "broadband," whatever the heck *that* was.

The CEO had come to speak to this investors' meeting in person, armed with spreadsheets, accounting statements, and charisma that could sell an air-conditioning unit to an Eskimo. After reassuring the bevy of nervous investors with a breakdown of the company's ample profits, and reminding them that all fast-rising stocks were prone to occasional price corrections, he suggested that the dip in value was a great buying opportunity.

'Fascinating,' the Doctor had murmured as the unease of the crowd gradually turned to renewed excitement about Enron and its bright future.

Ken Lay knew how to throw a party, too. After the presentation, the meeting dissolved into a drinks-and-buffet style soirée, where Peri was currently enjoying a glass of very nice champagne while rubbing shoulders with a collection of Houston's movers and shakers... and watching the Doctor trying to *avoid* rubbing shoulders with them.

She smiled brightly as he finally managed to extricate himself and reach her side.

'So, whaddya think?' she asked.

With a look that suggested she didn't really want to know what he thought about this place, he snapped, 'Did I say something about "someplace more civilised?" I should be so lucky.'

Peri rolled her eyes at him.

'I meant about the company. What's the verdict?'

'Unclear,' he said, looking decidedly unhappy. 'On the one hand, the people in charge are selling stock as if their lives depend on it, and generally giving every impression of rats abandoning a sinking ship. On the other hand, the financial statements paint a picture of a profitable, growing business. The top executives are experienced and respected in their field, and I gather from some of the conversations I've overheard that several of

them are very close to the current American presidential administration.'

'That doesn't make much sense, does it? There must be some reason why they want to dump all their stock. What are you going to do?'

The Doctor shrugged, reaching out to snag a glass of bubbly from a passing waiter, before gesturing toward the canapés.

'I, my dear Peri, am going to eat some of Kenneth Lay's lovely food, and drink some of his lovely champagne. And then I'm going to go look at some other opportunities in hopes that at least some of them will be more clear-cut and less contradictory than this one. Coming?'

'Right behind you,' Peri said, and followed him toward the buffet.

Seattle, 1987

For a man who counted his age in centuries, Peri decided, the Doctor really did have a ridiculously short attention span. Admittedly, this last guy had raised being boring to an art form – what was it about men named Howard? But still, it was a good thing she'd tagged along, or the Doctor might have dozed through the perfect money-loser.

To be perfectly honest, it was a bit surprising that he had trusted her judgement on the matter. She was still wavering back and forth between a vague sense of pride that he'd followed her suggestion, and a suspicion that he was so sick of the entire process that he would have written a cheque to just about anyone simply in order to be done with it.

Seating herself across from him on a sunny bench in the city park, she parked the bag of Chinese takeaway in the space between them and started pulling out boxes. There was nothing like a container of vegetable fried rice and a spring roll to recharge before the next adventure... hopefully one that involved fewer ledger statements and profit and loss reports.

Beside her, the Doctor didn't seem to be attacking his prawn crackers with anything near his usual enthusiasm. She studied his silent, worried expression for a few moments before finally giving in.

'What?' she asked, a little more sharply than she'd intended.

He hesitated for an instant before answering. 'I suppose you're quite sure about this business proposal.'

So much for trust...

'Relax, Doctor,' she replied with complete assurance, 'This is practically my own time and place, and I can recognise a really stupid idea when I hear one.'

'Hmm, well... I never claimed to be an expert on what human beings will and won't spend money to purchase.' The Doctor paused, looking increasingly uncomfortable.

'But it was a *substantial* amount of capital to invest.'

Peri gestured with her half-eaten spring roll, splattering little drops of sweet and sour sauce on the bench between them. 'Trust me – this place is *doomed*. No one in their right mind is going to shell out four bucks when they can go down to the corner shop and get it for twenty-five cents. It's practically highway robbery!'

The Doctor seemed unconvinced. 'You must admit, though – the samples they gave us were *very* good.'

'Yeah, okay. It was good... but *four dollars?* They oughtta serve it in gold-plated to-go containers for that price!'

'I suppose it does seem a bit excessive.' The Doctor wiped his hands on a paper napkin and pulled a sheaf of papers from inside his jacket, staring at them for a long moment. 'It's done now, at any rate. We shall have to trust your judgement on the matter.'

Peri swallowed the last bite of her spring roll. 'Stop worrying, already. If this place stays in business for more than a year, I will personally clean the TARDIS engines with a toothbrush. I mean, c'mon – how can you take the guy seriously when he wants to rename the stores after a character from *Battlestar Galactica*?'

Her companion peered at her uncomprehendingly.

'Peri, what *are* you talking about?'

'You weren't listening at all after the first ten minutes, were you? After he acquires that other company, he's going to change the name of all the stores. Which is stupid, because at least *Il Giornale* sounds sort of... I dunno – *upscale*. Much better than *Starbucks*, anyway. Some people just don't have an ounce of common sense.'

The Doctor stared at her, wide-eyed, the sliver of crispy duck sliding unnoticed from his chopsticks.

Of Eden Stood Disconsolate

Rachel Simpson Hutchens

Craig has expressed the view that the Sixth Doctor was his favourite, and that Colin was handed a raw deal – in particular with regards to his costume. Also, in an interview about his novel Millennial Rites*, Craig told the interviewer that he was most proud of this one moment in the book: "Mel shook her head sadly. 'That just isn't fair,' she muttered. 'The universe rarely is,' he whispered. 'That's why I'm here.'"*

My story is a homage to Craig's view of the Sixth Doctor – who is also my favourite Doctor – and I hope explains, in part, the reason for the darkness to his character and the brightness of his coat!

Imagine, *if you will, a stagnant and corrupt society. A race of pompous fools, gifted with a strange curse – eternal life with only a changing face. Imagine ten million years passing. Ten million years of absolute power. Control over every speck of dust, every atom, every being from the smallest microbe to the largest planet. Individuality tolerated rather than approved. Sexual relationships rendered unnecessary. Compassion only a small and insignificant part of justice. Imagine it.*

∞

The Doctor sighs, and snatches back his hand, on the verge of stroking his sleeping companion's hair. He shakes his head and smiles grimly, before striding out of her room and into the control room of the TARDIS.

∞

Imagine them stagnating as they live on, and on, and on. Living on so long that they forget how they once appreciated the philosopher's stone that they laboured so hard for. Remembering only the burden of responsibility that their every action can have. Remembering only their importance in maintaining the natural flow of history. All actions and interactions blending and dying into one, final law: Thou shalt not interfere.

∞

The Doctor tuts as he strides around the circular room, fiddling with buttons and prodding at levers. If he has learnt anything through the years of his existence, it is that he cannot

bear to stay still. Always has to be moving, exploring. Doing something to satisfy his insatiable need for action and interaction. Always fearful, deep down, that he is doing the wrong thing, but knowing that he must do it or betray everything that he holds dear to him. He does not begrudge Peri her sleep, but the hours of rest fill him with a sense of loss. He runs his fingers through his tangle of curly hair and feels both frustrated and ridiculous. He takes a step towards her room, stops dead, and then continues to pace around the console. He wishes she would wake.

∞

Imagine the feel of the passing of seconds to a being who feels the whole of time – past, future, present, infinity – beating within his veins. Imagine.

∞

The Doctor takes off his coat and slings it carefully on the floor. He's in the wardrobe again, rifling through racks and racks of clothes. He often finds himself in the TARDIS wardrobe when Peri sleeps, rummaging and rummaging, although what he's after he's not entirely sure. His current garb satisfies his taste for flamboyancy, although it surprises him that he has such a need. The darker his thoughts, the more his hideous coat of many colours feels appropriate. The more Peri complains, the more he enjoys it. The latter confuses him. But his feelings for Peri have always confused him. He almost suspects that his ridiculous overconfidence – although doubtless warranted – is overcompensating for something faintly ridiculous. Fingers skimming over dark velvet and heavy, bitter cloth. The action is almost calming. Hypnotic. He pauses at a dark blue coat and smiles. He wonders if Peri would approve, and almost feels handsome for a moment. He laughs at himself and leaves the wardrobe hurriedly, grabbing his bright coat on the way out.

∞

Imagine the spark of adventure taunting you ceaselessly, drawing you ever onwards. Imagine the simple pleasures of life, which an education of the highest social class never even mentioned.

∞

The Doctor uninstalled the TARDIS food machine some time ago. He can't think why he ever put up with it for so long. A relic of a life he'd rather forget, where food was food,

and never pleasure. He knows he's not as svelte as his former selves now. If he attempted to put on the cricket whites of yesteryear, he suspects he'd never get the trousers past his thighs. Overindulgence has its price to pay he realises, and delights in it. Peri often laughs and teases him for his increasing waistline. He doesn't always take it as well as he should, he knows. But he's glad of it all the same.

∞

Imagine – ridiculous thought – a Time Lord sacrificing their life for a human being.

∞

The Doctor cannot sit still. He strides back into Peri's room and shouts. Peri barely shifts but her eyelids flicker and the Doctor knows she's awake. He stomps around a little, picking up items on her dressing table randomly and scattering them across the room. She hates it, but he can't seem to help it. She finally sits bolt upright, a complaint already on her lips, when he drops her perfume and it smashes, a strong scent of roses overpowering the Doctor for a moment.

She shouts, he overpowers, and they set off on their next adventure, grumbling and arguing in the way they always cannot seem to help.

∞

No need to imagine his companions leaving. They always do.

∞

The Doctor knows that Peri will leave him, one way or another. His companions flash in and out of his life, reminding him of everything he can never have. He tries not to be morbid. More than ever, it is hard work. He can see every strand of time, every possibility, ever moment that ever could, ever has or ever will be. Every step he takes he twists his friends in, and dooms them to some disaster. He bends under his responsibility, but does not break. He hopes that, one day, they will forgive him for that.

A Very Valeyard Christmas

Craig Hinton

Craig was a prolific submitter of story ideas to Virgin, BBC Books and Big Finish, and the following short story proposal was submitted for inclusion in one of the Short Trips *Christmas anthologies.*

While the story never saw the light of day, editor Simon Guerrier has kindly allowed us to reproduce the original proposal here, for posterity, and to reflect on the fun Craig had with some of his short fiction.

Deep within the bowels of the Matrix, the Keeper is attending to the machinery. But his mind is elsewhere. Gallifrey is celebrating Otherstide, a day where the normally staid inhabitants let their hair down; for the Keeper, it is a day of reflection. He is intimately connected with the Other, because he is intimately connected with the Doctor. This is the Valeyard, lurking in the shadows of the Matrix after the events of Trial of a Time Lord.

He remembers the Doctor's last Otherstide. His first Otherstide. What it means to be a Time Lord, and what it means to be the Doctor. The beauty of Gallifrey and the Capitol; the longing to see the outside universe. Cousins who had travelled, and cousins who had eschewed reality for the dead and dusty past. And the Doctor's desperate need to leave Gallifrey and experience the wonders that lay beyond its boundaries.

And then further back... the very first Otherstide. The founding of the Time Lords, the celebrations and the fireworks... and the desperate need to leave. Jumping Looms... a desperate gamble for the future...

And then – *obliquely, nothing too fanwanky* – he remembers his own birth. His own, personal Otherstide. He tells the Matrix to show him the Doctor... and the Sixth Doctor and Mel are at a Christmas party, pulling crackers and laughing and joking.

The Valeyard turns away. Everyone is having fun apart from him. He didn't ask to be born, but he has a purpose. A purpose which has to be fulfilled. He picks up the Gallifreyan equivalent of a Christmas cracker and pulls it apart.

'Bang!'

DMW
-08-

The Jumping of the Shark

Steve Graeme & Adrian Middleton

They say that when a TV series goes from being good to bad that it has 'jumped the shark' – a reference to the episode of Happy Days *where the Fonz did exactly that. Many* Doctor Who *fans argue when the original show jumped the shark, with many identifying Seasons 23 and 24 as the so-called turning point. So, what if, I thought, I wrote a story that charted that exact moment, when* Doctor Who *went from good to bad…*

– Steve

'Zarks!' The Doctor cursed at the fuzzy grey image of three large, powerful predators that, according to the view screen, circled the TARDIS.

'What are Zarks, exactly?' asked Mel, concerned by the sudden and unexpected delay to her reunion with the Doctor – *her* Doctor, she reminded herself – the one back on Oxyveguramosa. Despite this earlier version's assurances to the contrary, Mel's travels with the Time Lord had taught her that every moment spent in his company had the potential to erase his future timeline.

'Time Sharks,' the Doctor explained, examining several on-screen read-outs before thumping the control console in a desperate attempt to restore the time rotor's function. 'They're not actual sharks, but their function is similar. They circle the shallower parts of the vortex looking for time eddies. Where there are time eddies, there's occasionally food.'

'Food?' Mel blanched. 'What do they eat?'

'The TARDIS, given half the chance.' Despite such a horrible prospect, the Doctor didn't seem to be too worried. 'Zarks feed on any of the larger pieces of temporal flotsam and jetsam, which time eddies have a tendency to attract. Fortunately, *I've* never been careless enough to get stuck in a time eddy before, I've always managed to avoid them.'

'So, what made you careless this time?'

'*I* wasn't careless,' he huffed indignantly, 'the Time Lords were. In their desire to ensure that you get straight home they used a zectronic attractor beam. It forced the TARDIS along a predetermined path. Any attempt to deviate from its coordinates would result in the ship being shaken apart.'

'Ah,' said Mel, 'so you attempted to deviate?'

'Not at all!' he snapped, looking genuinely hurt by the suggestion. 'Zectronic beams offer absolutely no protection against any external force that may cross their path. Despite the chance of such a thing happening being somewhere in the region of two hundred and seventy-six thousand to one against, the beam passed through a time eddy, which broke its grip and left us becalmed in the eye of a time storm.'

'Right,' said Mel, who was out of breath just listening to the explanation. 'So how do we get out?'

'Well,' the Doctor said, double-checking his instruments, 'unless a more powerful zectronic beam can be used to tow us out, our only chance will be to hitch a lift on a passing Zark.'

She glanced at the view screen, resisting the sudden urge to start counting teeth.

'This is a Zark which wants to eat us?'

'Yes, I'm afraid so,' he agreed. 'Zarks know how to attune themselves to the current of the time eddy. They go with the flow, snatching up their prey as they spiral past before swooping out of harm's way.'

'Oh, great.'

'Not a very pleasant scenario, I'll grant you. Still,' he smiled reassuringly, 'there is a precedent for getting out of this little predicament. Did I… *will I* ever tell you about The Legend of Rassilon's Cat?'

'Not so far,' Mel said, shaking her head, 'and it looks like your future self probably won't be getting the opportunity.'

'Yes, well, in his later years, Rassilon travelled a lot, and his only companion on these journeys was a silvery white cat. This cat was highly regarded, because scholars believe that its wisdom guided old Rassilon in his dotage. During one of his travels, Rassilon was stranded in a time eddy as the Zarks circled over and around him.'

The story sounded ridiculous to Mel, but then, she mused, it *was* a legend. And *Jason and the Argonauts* was equally ludicrous. 'What did he do?'

'"*And so the cat stepped out and snared the Zark,*" the Doctor said theatrically, miming the actions as he quoted from some unknown text, *"'which towed them from the calm and freed the Barque".'*

'Which means... *what* exactly?' Mel asked, bemused.

'The story has it that he tied the cat to a ball of string and sent it out into the vortex. Being so small the predators didn't notice, and it tied the string to the tail of a passing Zark, which inadvertently pulled Rassilon's Ship from the eddy, allowing them to escape before they could be eaten.'

'Right,' she resisted the urge to spiral her finger against her temple, 'so you want to tie a piece of string to a Zark's tail?'

"'*I live by risk. I calculate the odds,*" the Doctor smiled, drawing out a piece of hemp from inside his voluminous multicoloured coat. 'Unlike Rassilon, I have a good solid piece of Indian rope to tie around my waist, and some spare bladamite tubing. And if that isn't enough, I was trained in the art of the lasso during my brief time with Colonel Cody's Wild West Parade!'

∞

According to the TARDIS scanner, the closest of the Zarks measured some one hundred and eighty metres from the tip of its nose to the viciously barbed tail which the Doctor, drifting only a short distance away, was now preparing to ensnare. According to his recitation *their strength and their speed can pull us from harm, to turbulence and away from this calm*. Mel had winced at the poetry, which reminded her of the simplistic verses she used to read in the *Rupert the Bear* cartoons at the back of her father's *Daily Express*.

'*"Hitching a ride to the river of time, all that we need is a hook and a line".*' She hadn't been able to shut him up until all forty seven verses had been completed. She wondered briefly if *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* had anything to say on the subject of Gallifreyan poetry.

On the panel in front of her, Mel had spotted something. Lifting the plastic beaker that the Doctor had tied to the end of his rope, she shouted into the makeshift mouthpiece.

'Doctor?'

There was a pause. Looking at the screen she could see the Doctor, a similar beaker held to his ear, sizing up his target as it made another pass.

'Not now, Mel,' his voice echoed, 'this is a very crucial moment.'

'But a red light's started blinking on the console,' she insisted.

'Which panel?'

'Panel three.'

'It's just a message. It can wait.'

∞

Cursing Melanie Bush under his breath, the Doctor tried to put aside her interruption.

Red Light, panel three.

Recalling the lessons he had learned from an ancient mystic – the Swami Riva – he returned his attention to the circling Zarks.

Hang on, a message?

Only someone with access to a space-time telegraph could send a message. So… it was either a distress signal from the Brigadier or… the Time Lords.

'Hang on, Mel,' he sighed, 'I'm coming back in.'

∞

'Well?' Mel asked anxiously, as the Doctor, unlooping more hemp from around his shoulders than could *ever* have fitted into his pockets, examined the stream of ticker-tape that spewed out from beneath the flashing red light.

'It's from Gallifrey alright,' he said, interpreting the crudely punched ticker code, 'but its not a message I'm particularly keen on answering. I'd rather be eaten by the Zarks…'

'What is it?' Mel insisted.

'An invitation. Complete with an RSVP they can lock onto and use to pull us back to Gallifrey.'

'But – that's wonderful news, surely.' she said, but the Doctor's dour expression told her a different story. 'How bad can it be?'

'It's a *wedding* invitation, Mel,' he said, letting the spool of paper fall to the floor. 'This always happens. Pop back to Gallifrey for five minutes and people start trying to reintegrate you into society. Pathetic.'

'Look,' Mel's bemusement had given way to frustration, 'do we want to get out of here, or what? Do you really think being a guest at a Gallifreyan wedding is so bad that certain death is a better choice?'

'Yes,' the Doctor began, 'but…'

'Do you really think your lasso will save us before the Zarks eat the TARDIS?'

The Doctor shrugged. 'Where there's life, there's hope.'

'Doctor!'

'You don't understand, Mel.' He shifted uncomfortably as he lowered the last coil of rope the ground. 'It's not just any wedding. It's… *mine*.'

'Yours?' Mel squeaked, stunned by the revelation.

'Yes. It's one of the many reasons I left Gallifrey all those years ago.'

'I didn't even know Time Lords had weddings.'

'Of course we do, but Time Lord weddings aren't exactly everyday affairs. They're more like Royal Weddings, arranged to seal an alliance between two houses.'

'An *arranged* marriage?' Mel was amazed. 'You're telling me that the Doctor, the most independent and uncontrolled spirit in the universe, is being *forced* into a society wedding against his will.'

'I'm afraid so,' the Doctor hung his head with shame. 'It was all decided a *very* long time ago. I haven't seen her in more than six hundred years.'

'Well, you were going to have to face up to it at some time, Doctor.'

'Alright,' the Doctor sighed, resigning himself to the prospect. 'But I'm not convinced it's the lesser of two evils…'

∞

The purple glow of the zectronic beam faded as the TARDIS materialised in the centre of the Great Agustine Atrium. Beneath its ornate, ivy-snared arches, the cousins were gathering around the recently arrived blue box. Here they waited for the doors to open and for the groom to step outside.

'Lord Braxiatel,' said one of the older cousins in an agitated voice, 'this is most irregular. The Doctor is *not* a cousin of our House. While we're honoured to provide hostelry for a former President, I'm not sure why we…'

'The Doctor has no House of his own, Cousin Fargin,' said the Cardinal, staying any further objection with the palm of his hand. 'He never sought adoption when Lungbarrow disappeared, but as his closest kin on Gallifrey it is my duty to receive him as if he were an Agustine cousin.'

'Kin?' Fargin was surprised. 'So you are bound by blood? I hadn't realised.'

'It's not something I like to discuss, cousin, but I'm obliged to serve as his host.'

'Of course, of course,' Fargin agreed, his objections withdrawn. 'I'll see to it that his rooms are prepared –'

As they spoke, the TARDIS door opened slightly, and a curly mop of blond hair poked around the side as the Doctor looked sheepishly around the chamber.

'Doctor!' Brax turned from his discussion with Fargin to greet his fellow Time Lord with open arms. 'It's good to see you.'

'*You?*' The Doctor's brow furrowed as he emerged from behind the door and stepped into the Atrium. 'What are *you* doing here? And where is here?'

'Pleased to see you too, Doctor,' said Brax smugly, noting that the Doctor had elected to wear a blue variation on his usually kaleidoscopic costume. Blue, he noted, was the colour of mourning. '"Here" is the Agustine House of the Prydonian Chapter, which will be your home until the completion of the wedding ceremony.'

'Ah, yes,' the Doctor mumbled. 'About the wedding. I'm afraid it's quite impossible. I can't go through with it. No time in the schedule. No room at the inn. It will cause far too many complications.'

'Really, Doctor?' Brax smiled. The response wasn't entirely unanticipated. Once

the wedding notice had been opened the laws of quantum entanglement had practically required the TARDIS to arrive at the point of invitation. Still, he mused, that wouldn't have stopped the Doctor. 'Then why did you allow yourself to be recalled? You normally run away when you don't want to do something.'

'Yes, well, that's a long story, and it wouldn't resolve anything if I did run away. It would just put things off.'

'Quite.' said Brax. What was a six hundred year delay between Time Lords? 'I must say, Doctor, this behaviour is remarkably out of character for you. Might I ask why the wedding is impossible.'

'I'm, er…' the Doctor struggled with his answer.

'Because he's already married!' Mel said as she stepped out from the TARDIS.

She stood, framed in the blue doorway, in a white satin dress that complemented the long red tresses that cascaded from beneath a swept-back veil held in place by a crystal tiara. In her hands she was holding a wedding bouquet made from a combination of artificial pink carnations, some vivid red roses and some white eustomas which had hastily been picked from a garden buried deep inside the TARDIS. Lifting up her left hand she made a point of showing off the glittering blue wedding ring that adorned the third finger.

'Yes, quite,' the Doctor said, reluctantly raising his own left hand before flashing a similar ring.

'So,' Brax frowned, clearly not taken in by the charade, 'you've come to break the news to the bride? She *will* be disappointed.'

'Varda, disappointed?' the Doctor asked, missing the irony. 'I'd have thought she'd be as relieved as me. She never seemed to be very keen on the idea.'

'Times change, Doctor. Varda's keen to see this through. It's been a long time since the blood of a president has mixed with the House of Fordfarding.'

'That's hardly surprising, Brax. They've had more renegades than any House I can think of. And when the deal was made both of our Houses were down on their luck.'

'True,' Brax conceded, 'but your elevation to the Presidency on no less than two occasions makes you the most eligible bachelor in Time Lord society, Doctor. I'm terribly jealous.'

'I don't think!' the Doctor replied, missing none of the irony in that last remark. 'So,' he said, peering around the chamber and trying to see over the heads of the crowd of cousins that had gathered, 'where is Varda? No point wasting time. Best to break the bad news right away.'

'Bad news, Doctor?' His kinsman smiled. 'You mean your prior marriage? I hardly think it would be recognised by Prydonian Law, especially when you're using retooled mergin nuts as wedding bands. I must say, the blue Hammerite was a nice touch.'

'Brax, I am not marrying that… *that* woman. Mel and I are married and that's that. True love runs… true, and all that. Now,' he said, making to return to the TARDIS, 'if you don't mind, Mel and I have to…'

'So,' one of the others interrupted. It was another of the old cousins, whose regalia marked him out as the Registrar that would be presiding over the ceremony, 'has your marriage been consummated, Doctor?'

'N-no,' the Doctor stammered, 'but…'

'No buts,' the Registrar continued. 'You know that it's a requirement if you wish to challenge the betrothal.'

'Perhaps,' Brax said wrily, 'you would like Cousin Usforth here to find you and Mel a loom…'

'A loom?' Mel interrupted, starting to regret her bright idea. At the time it had seemed the obvious way out of this mess. 'Have you got a speech impediment?'

'It's alright, Mel,' the Doctor explained. 'Consummation is a lot less romantic here on Gallifrey. It's not what you think. Alright, Brax,' he said, removing the blue mergin nut and offering his clenched fists in a gesture of surrender, 'you win. It's a fair cop.'

Cousin Usforth stepped forward, drawing out a length of red cord which came to life as he draped it over the Doctor's wrists, snaking itself around them and ensnaring him in an impenetrable knot.

'What are you doing?' Mel protested, confused at what appeared to be an arrest. She wondered if trials were Gallifrey's most popular pastime. 'Doctor?'

'It's a tradition,' explained Brax as two of the cousins stepped forward to lead the prisoner away. 'The groom must report to his House to place himself under Arrest until the time of the ceremony. It's my duty as his host to have him led him to a cell where he must await his fate…'

Mel moved forward to accompany the Doctor, but found herself stayed by Brax's hand '… *alone*.'

'So, it's a *forced* arranged marriage?' she asked, stamping her foot and shouting after the Doctor. 'I thought you said the Time Lords were civilised.'

'It's a very old tradition, Mel,' he shouted back as he was escorted away. 'I'll be all right.'

∞

With the Doctor gone and his companion escorted to more comfortable quarters, Irving Braxiatel slipped off into the shadows, passing through the winding corridors of House Agusti. All the way there he felt as if eyes were upon him, as if the House itself were

watching him from the darkness.

Stepping into the relative comfort of his private rooms – the ones he'd lived in throughout his years at the Time Academy – Irving Braxiatel reached for a lamp to illuminate the room. As he did so, he instead illuminated the weathered face of an unwanted visitor.

'Well?' the voice asked.

'You're not supposed to be here,' Brax hissed between clenched teeth. He was clearly unhappy with his visitor.

'As if that matters,' the voice replied. 'What news of the Doctor?'

'He's here,' Brax confirmed.

'Excellent,' the voice announced.

'You have what you wanted. This clears the slate.'

'Between you and I, perhaps,' said the voice, 'but what about the Doctor?'

'What about him?' Brax asked, keen to get his guest out of the way as quickly as possible.

'Atoning for your past sins by committing another, Lord Braxiatel? You're betraying your closest kin, after all.'

'*Technically*,' Brax conceded, 'but if you're telling the truth…'

'I am,' said the voice.

'Then I'm sure the Doctor would understand,' he added. 'I'm only doing this because you could never lie to me, and because I'm taking your needs at face value.'

'You're doing this because I know your secret. You're no more a native of this time period than I am.'

'Which is why I've trusted you. If I find out you've manipulated me, I swear I'll hunt you down myself and turn your exile into a vaporisation sentence.'

The voice chuckled. 'Spare the theatrics for one of your pet projects, Brax,' it said. 'Just give me the biodatapod, and I'll see you in three days.'

Reluctantly, Brax pulled out a small metal object from his robes. It was circular, like a large locket, with an ornate hasp.

'Here,' he said. 'Take it.'

∞

Melanie Bush paced her quarters anxiously, holding up the hem of her dress to protect the train as she did so. The waiting room was certainly nicer than the one she's been offered during the Doctor's trial, but the lack of alternative clothes was beginning to irritate her. Although the idea of getting into a wedding dress had appealed – it was, after all, meant to be every girl's dream – the facts that the corset was loose and that the dress was also a size

too big were weighing heavily upon her current mood. *How long do these things take –*

A click drew Mel's attention to the entrance of her suite just in time for her to see Lord Braxiatel's face appear in the doorway.

'Hello?' she asked.

'Miss Bush?' He smiled. 'Sorry to disturb you. The Doctor asked me to look after you while he's indisposed.'

Ushering Brax into the room, Mel threw her faux bouquet onto the Gallifreyan equivalent of a chaise longue and flopped down beside it. It had been *hours*.

'I don't understand why you're doing this, Lord Braxiatel,' she eventually said, 'aren't you the Doctor's friend?'

'And more,' Brax replied, sitting himself down in the space next to her, 'but that's not the issue. Weddings are rare events these days, but still very necessary. Besides, once it's over the Doctor can go back about his business saving the universe.'

Mel frowned. 'So he'll be free to go when this is all over?'

'Of course,' Brax agreed.

'With his wife?' She asked, worried about how her position aboard the TARDIS might be affected. Worried even more that having a wife would stop the future Doctor from ever hooking up with her.

'No,' said Brax, reassuringly. 'He's free to travel alone, or with you, as before. It's not like he has to become a stay-at-home father.'

Father?

Mel's jaw dropped. 'I – I thought he was getting married, not having a baby.'

'You're from Earth, aren't you? Forgive me, but Time Lord weddings aren't anything like Earth weddings. We don't marry for love, nor for companionship. The express purpose of a Time Lord wedding is to create a loomling.'

Mel looked at him blankly.

'A Gallifreyan child,' he corrected.

'Oh.'

'When we became Time Lords we were cursed. Our experiments with time blighted our society and left our people sterile. We tried everything to reverse the damage – budding, cloning, interspecies breeding, parthenogenesis; eventually we invented looms that could recombine our genetic data to create random codes which, in turn, could be woven into living beings. Modern Gallifreyans.'

'I see,' said Mel, leaning forwards as she considered this. 'So, where do weddings fit into all of that?'

'The looms are ancient. Millions of years old. Every few generations a House will arrange a biodata exchange, mixing genetic information from two Houses so that both will

have a stronger gene pool. The biodata exchange is secured by betrothal between a male from one House and a female from another. Once their biodata are woven together and a child loomed, both are free to go their separate ways, handing the child over to the Maternity Service where trained aunts and matrons take responsibility for their upbringing.'

Parenthood without responsibility? Yes, Mel could easily imagine the Doctor as an absent father.

'So, why is the Doctor so scared?'

'He never liked responsibility. Certainly not if he could avoid it. He was quite a wayward child. I'll spare you the details, but – after being betrothed he went on to shame his House. They're gone now.'

'Gone?' Mel was uncertain what Brax meant.

'Some Houses struggle to keep up with the times,' he continued. 'With Lungbarrow – the Doctor's House – gone, there was nobody to enforce his marriage, and his renegade status left him relatively safe from pursuit by the bride's family. But with his high profile in recent years, the Fordfardings decided that they wanted his biodata very, *very* much.'

'I see,' said Mel. 'This biodata then, it's his DNA?'

'It's *more* than DNA,' Brax explained, 'it's his entire history. When two biodata extracts are mixed, the lives and histories of their donors mutate to form a new life, which captures not just the biology, but also the experience of the donors. Varda and the Doctor have very different histories, and they don't exactly see eye to eye. She is a Fordfarding, one of the original Prydonian Houses, and the first to which Lord Rassilon himself belonged. When he rejected his own kin the Fordfardings fell from grace, struggling to restore their status among the Great Houses. As a Modern Hero of Gallifrey, the Doctor's family would rise in status. Varda's under an awful lot of pressure.'

'Is there nothing we can do to stop this?' Mel asked.

'There's always a way,' said Brax, 'Have the Doctor ever told you about The Legend of Rassilon's Cat?'

Mel rolled her eyes.

∞

After the banns had been broadcast over Public Register Video for three days, the Doctor was summoned back to the Great Agustine Atrium where the wedding ceremony was to take place. He'd been allowed to keep his mourning suit despite tuts of disapproval from some of the cousins, who had ensured it was returned to him neatly pressed and ready to wear to his wedding.

Four cousins escorted him from his cell in the cloisters along the House's main

concourse to the Great Agustine Atrium. It had been refreshed and its dimensions had been extended since the TARDIS had arrived there, and its arches were now higher, further apart, and more decorously carved with ancient images recounting the legends and histories of Gallifrey's past. It was packed with cousins whose numbers far exceeded those of the Doctor's own House, leading him to wonder if any of its cousins has been illegally time travelling so they could watch the ceremony twice. Several Public Register Video cameras floated high above the crowd, capturing the event for posterity and, more importantly, for the entertainment of the Gallifreyan masses.

At the far end of the Atrium stood Registrar Usforth and Cardinal Braxiatel. Beside them, taking the spaces that would normally have been reserved for the Doctor's immediate family stood his guests: Leela of the Sevateem, the Lady Romanadvoratrelundar, his granddaughter Susan, and Mel.

'Hello, ladies,' the Doctor smiled as he reached the far end of the hall where he would await his new bride. 'I don't suppose any of you would care to intervene when they get to the bit about any impediment or just cause?'

'I am married to Andred, Doctor,' said Leela. 'I could not speak out in such a fashion.'

'I don't think that would be appropriate, grandfather.'

'No, Susan, perhaps not in your case,' said the Doctor, his face alight with the joy of seeing her. She was older, but she had the same body he had left behind on Earth all those years ago; the same elfin face, and the same eyes. 'It's good to see you, by the way.'

'Well, when they broadcast the banns, I had to make my way here,' she explained.

'Ah, yes. The banns. So everyone I've ever offended on Gallifrey will know I'm here. That's reassuring. What about you, Romana. You're free and single.'

'I'm flattered, Doctor, but it is *only* a wedding. You shouldn't be so worried.'

'Only a wedding? *Only* a wedding? Tell that to Ferdinando de Medici, or Catherine Howard, or Diana Spencer.'

'Come along, Doctor,' said Brax, breaking up the party, 'your bride's waiting.'

The loud crashing of a staff striking the outside of the Atrium's traditional wooden door announced the bride's arrival, recalling the time when the Pythias – the ancient priestess-queens of Gallifrey – would arrive to demand suitable mates to bear their children.

'Mel . . ?' The Doctor looked pleadingly towards his companion as the pipes of an ancient harmoniser struck up the bridal march that had been selected by the groom only a few hours earlier.

A variation of Pachelbel's Canon in D Major played as Varda walked down the

aisle. As she got closer, Mel was shocked to see just how… *ancient*… she was. *There's no way she can have a child, surely,* she thought. Looking around the chamber, nobody else seemed too bothered by the incongruity of Miss Havisham getting married six hundred years late.

∞

As the Doctor waited for his bride to join him, he could see her withered face through a veil very similar to that worn by Mel only three days earlier. It wasn't a traditional Gallifreyan wedding dress, but rather a facsimile of an Earth dress, perhaps as a mark of respect for his favourite planet.

He smiled to himself. Whoever designed the dress clearly didn't understand Earth's fashions, because the large shoulder-pads were completely incongruous with the rest of the dress.

Hang on, Shoulder pads? The Doctor's face fell. *That isn't Varda.*

'Stop the wedding!' he shouted, taking Varda by the elbow and dragging her to the side of the chamber. 'This is a charade. I know who you are,' he whispered, 'and it isn't going to work.'

'Doctor, really…' said Brax, stepping forwards to try and resolve things.

'It's alright, Brax,' said the Doctor, 'I'll deal with this.' He led his bride-to-be over to the side of the chamber, pulling through a door that them into a small hexagonal apse. 'It looks like I won't need a Dalek invasion to save me after all,' he muttered under his breath.

∞

In the apse, the Doctor wasted little time tugging away Varda's veil.

'It won't work,' he said. 'I shan't be fooled by that crone disguise twice, Rani. You won't be needing this mask anymore.'

Reaching forwards, he plucked at the folds of skin, making to tear away the withered mask to reveal the familiarly arch eyebrows and unmistakeable pout of his old enemy. While it stretched a little, causing Varda to scream out, the skin held firm.

'Ah,' the Doctor said, realising his mistake. 'It's real, isn't it? You're not the Rani, after all, are you?'

Varda silently shook her head.

'It was the shoulder pads,' the Doctor muttered, 'I thought they were *her* shoulder pads.'

∞

Thoroughly embarrassed, the Doctor had run out of options, and the rest of the ceremony had passed without further incident. It had been mercifully short, and after swearing oaths of loyalty to each other's Houses, the Doctor and Varda were stood before the ceremonial Loom of the House of Fordfarding.

The Loom was very old, and very Heath Robinson. It looked like a large spherical copper washing machine overlaid with a mass of copper pipes covered with printed circuits. An open, porthole-like door in the centre of the loom stood ready to receive biodata extracts from the bride and groom.

'You may now present the splines,' announced Registrar Usforth as the ceremony drew towards its inevitable conclusion. Reaching into the folds of his waistcoat, the Doctor withdrew an ornate silver fobwatch, which he held out for Varda. It was intricately engraved with Gallifreyan symbols that matched much of the décor on the walls of the Atrium.

Varda had withdrawn a similar fobwatch, and offered it to the Doctor. Exchanging these 'splines', the bride and groom each stepped forward, opening their spline and examining it briefly before slotting their respective fobwatches into a centrifuge before stepping back from the Loom.

Usforth stepped up and closed the door before a turning a dial which selected the appropriate Looming Cycle. Within moments the machine began to shudder as the centrifuge sprang into life. Through the porthole a spiral of multicoloured light appeared, spinning faster and faster with every passing second. Before long the colours had blended into a single silvery-grey shade, and the spin cycle gently slowed to a stop.

'Forgive me,' said Varda, who appeared to be overcome with emotion, 'but I can't take this anymore.' Breaking away, she ran across the chamber and into the hexagonal apse.

'Is she all right?' the Doctor asked, reluctant to pursue someone so obviously overcome by irrational emotions.

'It's all right, Doctor, I'll see to her,' said Brax, chasing after his fellow Time Lord's bride.

∞

'Did you get it?' Brax asked.

"Varda" wiped away her crocodile tears and rubbed her sore face. She then held up a small vial which contained a sample of the Doctor's biodata.

'He didn't even notice me take it,' said the Rani.

'But he came perilously close. It's a good job that mask of yours held fast.'

'It's no mask,' said the Rani. 'Did you never wonder how I had the same body, even after 900 years?'

'I *had* assumed you regenerated into the same body. That's how I do it. But it's not that you *won't* regenerate, is it? You *can't* regenerate. That's the condition you need to cure. Just like the Master…'

'I'm nothing like the Master! I still have a full regenerative cycle, but I can't use it anymore. I've used age suppressants and hormone treatments for most of my life, and now I'm paying the price. My body refuses to regenerate.'

'So HRT has brought you to this?

'Not any more. I now have the resources to undo my condition.'

'I refused to regenerate for most of my life. It's how I avoided detection. By keeping my first body alive I've avoided all the different upgrades and modifications the Time Lords have been sneaking into your biogenic matrix. No special extras were ever added without my knowledge.'

'Those "special extras" are what make us Time Lords.'

'They made you puppets. The Doctor most of all. Tagged and watched throughout his life, brought in for punishment whenever he did something that they objected to. Remember, we were the same age, he and I.'

'That's brilliant,' said Brax. 'You found a way around the watching eyes of Gallifrey. But what's so special about the Doctor's biodata?'

'He and I were loomed from the same batch,' she said. 'I can use his biodata to patch my own; to restore my regenerative abilities.'

'If you can live long enough. Look at you, you've already started to suffer from significant age-related changes. Heterochronic mutation, tissue and organ shrinkage, oxidative stress. You're a mess.'

'A living mess, Brax. Unlike the rest of the Time Lords.'

'What are you saying?'

'I come from a future when the Time Lords are all gone, Braxiatel. As an exile I can't help, but I can warn you. Do something to save them, before *he* destroys you all. Now… get out of my TARDIS.'

∞

As Brax stepped out from the apse, the loud echo of dematerialisation filled the Great Agustine Atrium.

'Is she all right?' the Doctor asked. 'I heard a TARDIS.'

'She's overcome with grief, poor thing,' said Brax. 'You're harsh, sometimes

Doctor. There was no need to make all of this so difficult for everybody.'

'Ahem,' Registrar Usforth coughed politely, 'will the bride be joining us for the birth?' he asked.

Brax shook his head. 'Carry on without her, Usforth. She got what she wanted.'

'Very well.'

Returning to the now silent Loom, Usforth released the locks and the porthole door hissed open. Steam billowed outwards as Usforth leaned in to retrieve the newly loomed child. As he did so there was a yowling sound, and a hiss. The Registrar withdrew his bleeding hand and stammered 'He – he *bit* me!'

During the commotion, the Loomling stepped out from the porthole and yawned. As it did so, the Atrium shook with the collective gasp of those present. Instead of a fully grown young adult, what stepped from the Loom wasn't even humanoid.

It was... a cat.

Landing gently on its paws, the yawning cat padded over to the Doctor, at whose feet it promptly curled up, and went to sleep.

∞

The House of Agusti had been in uproar. While Fargin was demanding a paternity test, Usforth was busy declaring the wedding null and void, dismissing the Doctor's party from the proceedings.

After saying their farewells to Romana, to Leela, and to Susan, the Doctor and Mel returned to the TARDIS.

The cat followed them.

∞

Lord Braxiatel was waiting for the Doctor and Mel at the TARDIS door. Curled up in the Doctor's arms the silvery cat purred contentedly as the Time Lord rubbed its chin and ears.

'Are you going to tell me what that was all about?' the Doctor asked. 'Was there a biodata switch going on somewhere?'

'I can assure you, Doctor, the combination of your biodata and that of the… Varda was genuine. I personally reviewed the PRV tapes several times.'

'Yes, well, I'm still convinced that wasn't Varda. I'm made some enquiries and she hasn't been seen in years. Still, I'll check puss here and see if I can work out what happened.'

'Let me know if you find anything out, Doctor.'

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. 'I will if you will.'

∞

Back inside the TARDIS, the Doctor lowered the cat onto the coils of rope that lay beside the control console.

'He's a little cutie, don't you think?' he said to Mel. 'Let's call him Mog.'

'Mog?' the cat yawned. 'This kitty already has a name thanks, Doctor. Call me Splinx.'

The Doctor and Mel stared at each other in astonishment.

'Did it just speak?' Mel asked.

'Well, Gallifreyan cats *are* extremely intelligent…'

'But not that intelligent,' said Splinx, interrupting them. 'I'm special.'

'Oh?' The Doctor rounded on his newest companion. 'And how is that exactly?'

'Well,' said Splinx, 'have you heard The Legend of Rassilon's Cat?'

'Of course,' the Doctor said. '*"And when the Other chose to take his leave, and fearing that his actions would cause strife, he jumped into the Loom, and took his life."*'

'You've got it,' the cat yawned.

'Well, I haven't,' said Mel, confused.

'Many years ago,' the Doctor explained, 'one of my ancestors threw himself into a loom, knowing full well that Rassilon would find a way to bring him back and face punishment. But the Other had a brilliant mind, infecting Rassilon's Loom – the Loom we just used – so that any attempt to recreate him or any of his descendants would instead produce... a cat. Rassilon of course did exactly that, and the cat became his companion.'

'Rassilon's Cat!' said Mel, excitedly.

"'*This tale of tragedy and hope I tell",'* began the Doctor, spurred into retelling the legend, '*"of how the cat of Rassilon did dwell..."*.'

As Mel ran screaming from the room, Splinx, bored by having to hear a story he already knew, fell fast asleep.

The Rani suffering from HRT was an idea bounced between myself and Craig back in 1993. As a fan of big American soaps like Dynasty *an* Dallas*, Craig was a great fan of the camp mistress, and Kate O'Mara as the Rani filled that niche perfectly. For continuity fans who really want to know, Splinx was the name of the Sixth Doctor's cat in the 1986 Micropower Game* Doctor Who and the Mines of Terror*, developed for the Commodore 64.*

– Adrian

The Finest Restaurant Known To Man

Jon Arnold

It's rare that you get the opportunity to repay the debts you owe those who have passed on. Craig probably wouldn't have regarded me as owing him any favours, all he'd done was happily chat to a Tav newbie he'd never met before, immeasurably enliven a Gallifrey convention, crack wonderfully funny and tasteless jokes, and happily given his time to answer questions and chat online. As I discovered from the innumerable tributes paid to him, it was a generosity that came naturally to him, little kindnesses that so many could attest to, something that for me summed up all that's best about fandom. The sort of memories that made his early death all the sadder.

So when that opportunity came to repay those kindnesses, I decided I wanted to write something that had the elements I'd loved in his writing – fanwanks, frocks and fun. Fanwank that he delighted in as the joy of working in a shared universe. Frocks – well, I managed to get one posh frock in anyway. Above all though, there had to be fun, a Doctor Who *story that entertained. I couldn't imagine Craig wanting us to be maudlin when remembering him, I wanted to try and capture the fun that defined my memories of him and his work. Thanks, Craggles, I hope I've done you justice.*

Everything was chaos

It's always chaos when you open a new restaurant. Jenny just wished one of the bastards she'd asked for advice had warned her exactly how chaotic it would be. And it wasn't as if she had Delia Smith or even Keith-sodding-Floyd doing the cooking. You couldn't exactly pick and choose your kitchen talent when opening a small restaurant, however high your hopes.

Still, on the bright side, the chaos was due to the sell-out first night; all those ads in the local press had taken all but pennies of the savings she'd had, and she'd spent so long handing out leaflets on the streets she was on first name terms with the tramps. Never mind just getting on her bike, she'd built the bloody bike from scratch. And tonight she'd see if the damn thing would hold together.

It was touch and go at the moment. Just an hour to opening and the vegetables still needed peeling, the chef was throwing a strop that the dish he'd come up with last week wasn't on the menu (because, fundamentally, it was tasteless crap) and one of the waiters had already phoned in sick. Christ, she was already going to sleep well tonight.

And then the man walked in.

She told him, in blunt terms, to get out. It didn't ruffle him. She kept calm, held the upper ground. It was what Maggie did after all, and she'd learned everything she knew

from watching the PM. She repeated the injunction. He merely smiled.

Calm, stay calm. You are in control, she told herself. *You can face any man down on his own terms.*

'Why, Ms Banks, there's no need for this unpleasantness. I'm here to offer you a business opportunity.'

'Come back midday tomorrow. We'll have time to talk then.'

'Ah, you do disappoint me. Unfortunately, this is a once in a lifetime offer; one night only. And I guarantee my offer will put you on the map. For eternity.' He chuckled at his own private joke.

'You've got five minutes,' she said, all business now. 'Charlie! Charlie!'

'Madame?' Charlie. Head waiter. The eye of calm in this hurricane.

'Get Gordon back in that kitchen. I don't care what you do; give him double just for tonight if you have to.'

'Madame.' A slight incline of the head and he vanished back to his job as efficiently as he had appeared.

'Right. What the bloody hell can you offer us?'

'The chance for an immortal reputation. Spreading your fame wider than you ever dreamed.'

Business opportunity there. The more people knew about the place, the more people she could get through the doors. 'Okay. You've got me interested – what are the terms?'

'You won't regret it,' the man chuckled. His eyes suddenly seemed to be burning into hers, boring into her mind. And all the time he was grinning, grinning. 'I am the Master. and you will obey me.'

∞

There are certain promises which even the endless reaches of space and time cannot break. Such were the promises made by Melanie Bush, because even if her family or friends forgot them, she never did. Even a promise made the one time in university she'd got really drunk (just to find out what it was like, so she could remember never to do it again).

Jenny had been going on about how she was going to open restaurants, make her fortune and retire to the Bahamas with a toy boy. She'd made them all promise to be there on the opening night, whenever it was. So when, after they'd foiled the Kosnax invasion of 2015, Mel saw the story about the much-admired founder of the Ankari chain of restaurants running off to Spain with a scandalously younger pop star (who was in turn supposed to be dating a supermodel), her infallible memory snapped into action. Mind

you, she nearly didn't recognise Jenny since she seemed to have more plastic in her than a Tupperware factory.

∞

'Brighton, England, on the twenty-third of July nineteen hundred and eighty-seven,' announced the Doctor as he stepped from the TARDIS. He tugged uncomfortably at the suit Mel had forced him to change into. It didn't quite fit, having been made to measure for his previous incarnation, but it was all the TARDIS wardrobe seemed to have. He rather suspected that it was the old girl playing tricks on him, typical of the occasionally capricious sense of humour she seemed to be developing.

'. . . and,' he called slightly snidely, 'quarter to eight.' Even though Mel was one of the most organised people in the history of the universe, she still insisted on taking every last picosecond of available time to get ready. Naturally, the TARDIS wardrobe had exactly the dress she'd required to dazzle.

'Doctor, I'm waiting for you to put the umbrella up – a girl can't spend all that time trying to look her best and then have the British weather ruin the effect. Honestly…'

Mel was resplendent in emerald green, which was, for 1987, somewhat understated and yet slinky.

'My dear Mel, far be it from me to ruin a work of art to rival the Venus de Milo.' With a deft flick of the wrist, he opened and raised the multicoloured umbrella in one graceful movement. He held out his arm, ever the perfect gentleman. 'Shall we?'

Exchanging grins, they strolled through the typically English summer drizzle, ready for their gourmet banquet.

∞

'Well, how was I to know Jenny was going to forget?'

'Humans don't all have pachydermic recollection, Mel. Even my memory has occasionally been known to lapse.'

Mel gave a weak smile 'I suppose – still, it was good of her to find us a table anyway.'

'Yes…' The Doctor distractedly flicked through the menu. 'You know there are only two things that disappoint me about this.'

'Really? It all looks delicious to me.'

'Firstly, the lack of gumblejack. Pre-interplanetary travel Earth, though, it'd be churlish of me to complain. And secondly…' he snapped the booklet shut, returning his

undivided attention to her, '. . . the menu.'

'I thought it'd be good for you; help you with that diet…'

'Mel, when you told me we were attending the grand opening of your friend's restaurant I didn't expect to be shoved in a corner at a plastic table in the vegetarian equivalent of McDonalds.'

The Doctor was in one of his moods. And while it was usually best to let him pontificate, evenings like this weren't the best time for his occasional tantrum.

'Look on the bright side, at least they keep a decent wine list.' Mel wasn't surprised at that, if there was one thing Jenny had learned about at university, it was wine.

'Mmm, a strontium lining to every cloud, as they say on Androzani Major. Now, if you'll allow me, I have to winnow out some edible cuisine from this… this… rabbit food.'

The Doctor returned to his perusal of the menu, clearly considering the matter closed. Fortunately for Mel, she wasn't alone with the ostentatious black cloud of his mood for long.

'God, Mel. I'm so, so sorry. I mean, I just flat out forgot.'

Mel gave her old friend the benefit of her dazzling smile. 'Oh, it's no problem really – you should remember I've got the memory of an elephant!'

Jenny's answering smile was slightly more weak and watery. 'I suppose I should but, you know, the wine wiped out a lot of university memories. Anyway, since it was the wine that made me forget, I suppose I'll let the wine make it up to you too. A bottle of whatever you want, on the house.'

'Well, I don't know much about wines,' replied Mel, 'but I'll settle for a Chardonnay.'

Ever the charmer, the Doctor didn't bother looking up from his menu. 'Chateau Petrus '59, if you wouldn't mind.'

Jenny paled a little at the Doctor's order, but remained businesslike. 'Certainly sir, the wine waiter will be along in a minute.' She mouthed 'awkward bugger' to Mel, conveying in the shape of two silent words that she wondered what the hell she was doing with a stout older bloke like that.

This really hadn't been half the fun Mel had been anticipating. Actually, it hadn't been any of the fun.

∞

In a booth at the back of the restaurant a figure slightly too bulky and ill proportioned to be human watched from the shadows.

∞

It got little better.

The Doctor continued to be surly, graceless, even, when the waiter took their order. It seemed to Mel as if the staff wanted to punish him for that. She wouldn't have been surprised if they put some unwanted ingredients into his main course. Everyone else appeared to be halfway through their main course, while their own table remained resolutely empty – even the wine waiter was taking his time. Eventually, just as the main courses were being cleared their wine arrived.

The Doctor was still being a study in childish petulance; his casual small talk was clearly designed to put the waiter ill at ease. He remained professional though; his polite serving manner only giving the usual hint that he considered every customer beneath him. He was a beacon of calm amidst the chaos of opening night and served the wine – albeit in strangely bulky crystal glasses – very efficiently. With a small inclination of the head to Mel he quietly departed, his job done with the absolute minimum of fuss.

Just as she was about to switch into neutral, to escape the hell of the evening and the Doctor's endless anecdote about how vegetarianism was actually cannibalism on Bruselis, Mel became aware that something was wrong. Something was missing.

It was the Doctor. He'd gone quiet; an almost unheard of situation. He appeared to be staring intently at the wine glasses.

'Doc…'

He shushed her, pulling out a bright, blocky object from his pocket, which he waved over his glass. When it did nothing, he reached across the table and did the same to Mel's glass. Nothing again.

'Doctor, what are you doing? Is that some sort of wine tester?'

'Nothing of the kind, Mel; no-one's needed those since the fortieth century. It detects certain temporal energies.'

'And did it find any?'

'Not of the kind I was looking for.'

'So what's the problem? Might as well make the best of a bad night.' Mel reached for her glass, but the Doctor batted her hand away.

'That doesn't mean to say it's safe!' he warned. 'These repositories of tastelessness are replicas of the Crystal of Kronos, one of the most dangerous and terrible artefacts in this or any other universe. And just because neither of them are the crystal itself, it doesn't mean they're safe.'

Great, just to make it a perfect evening she wasn't going to be allowed to drink her wine either.

'Mel,' the Doctor said gently, reacting to her exasperation, 'there are few beings in this universe knowledgeable or mad enough to replicate the crystal, much less to use it as a mere wine glass. If nothing else, they'd be hunted down for blasphemy on at least twelve planets I could mention. It's no coincidence – look around, no-one else has been given glasses like these. Someone somewhere is sending us a message, and not a particularly nice one.'

Mel sighed inwardly, she'd been looking forward to a simple night off, away from monsters and violence. She should have realised that the Doctor wasn't used to such a concept. He'd probably point out that it was daytime on the other side of the planet anyway, or permanently daytime on some far distant world if she mentioned it.

'I take it we're going to investigate?'

The Doctor grinned.

∞

It was a remarkably simple investigation.

Mel had persuaded the Doctor to let her to question her old friend. Even though he'd mellowed in the time she'd known him, Mel was able to get on with people more easily, particularly old friends and insulted staff. Meanwhile, the Doctor had returned to the TARDIS to analyse the glasses, pausing only to collect the remains of their bottle of wine.

Jenny explained that the glasses had been a goodwill gift from a customer who had promised to pay her handsomely to keep a table free every night. Oddly, she couldn't remember what he looked like, but recalled how charming he was and that he dressed like a wealthy man. After apologising for the Doctor's behaviour (and promising she'd never bring him back) Mel said her farewells and returned to the TARDIS.

∞

As Mel left, the figure in the booth lifted a slim device, too slim, to his face.

'The bait has been taken,' he said, 'including the wine.'

At an unimaginably distant point in time and space, the Master reflected on the news. How sad it was that this Doctor lacked the refinement of previous incarnations.

∞

Mel found the Doctor waiting at the console, his finger hovering impatiently over the dematerialisation control.

'Ah, there you are. Good, good. Did you find anything useful?'

Mel recounted Jenny's story about the mysterious stranger, which elicited a slight smugness from the Doctor. The kind he had when he'd deduced almost exactly what was going on.

'Ha!' He was delighted. 'Well, my dear Mel, you're in for a treat. Because to make up for tonight's shambolic lack-of-a-repast, I'm going to take you to a place where we can sample epicurean delights from the finest restaurants in recorded history. And get to the heart of this intriguing matter.'

Mel smiled. Things could only get better.

∞

The journey was short – only five minutes – and the Doctor spent much of it explaining in long and, Mel suspected, made-up words how he knew what the glasses were and where they had come from. All she had understood was that residual artron energy traces in the glasses had indicated a temporal journey of roughly eight millennia. The Doctor was certain they'd come from somewhere called The Crystal Bucephalus. She could tell the Doctor was looking forward to the visit when he gave up trying to impress her with his cleverness and started eulogising the delights of their destination.

'You'll adore the Bucephalus Mel! The finest food, the finest wine; indeed, the finest restaurant known to mankind!' he said, throwing the door control open with a theatrical flourish, and then stepped outside. 'What else could you expect of a venture I had a hand in? And we're even dressed for the occasi– '

The Crystal Bucephalus was as awe-inspiring as the Doctor had promised, with a magnificent emerald statue of Alexander the Great's warhorse dominating the cathedral-like concourse. But instead of the exclusive clientèle the Doctor had led Mel to expect, the restaurant was overflowing with a crowd closer to what she'd find in Brighton. Over-fed bellies bulged against greasy t-shirts; tired mothers in the 101st century equivalent of shell-suits tried to shush their wailing offspring, and teenagers puffed on strange-smelling ciggies while what looked like their grandparents exchanged blue jokes in the corner. And at the entrance to the concourse itself a pair of employees dressed like a shiny pantomime horse greeted the guests whilst enduring the savage poking and prodding of curious pre-teens.

Mel smiled sweetly. 'You were saying?'

'This is outrageous! Sacrilege!' The Doctor was incandescent. 'It's a desecration of one of the wonders of the universe. You there!'

He strode off toward the Artemis Kronkburger café positioned at the foot of the Bucephalus, a force of nature given life. Mel struggled to keep up.

'What's going on here?'

The acne-ridden teenager manning the till took a step back, even though there was a yard of desk and protective screen behind.

'Wh–, wh–, what do you mean?' he stammered, trying not to antagonise the madman in front of him.

'This!' The Doctor half turned, making a sweeping gesture at the area behind him. 'This infestation. This plague of locusts!'

'I don't know what you mean –i– it's a normal day here.' The server was recovering his nerve a little.

'Calm it down, Doctor, you're scaring him.'

'I'll be doing a lot more than scaring him soon!'

Mel put her hand on the Doctor's arm. 'Let me take care of this.'

With a disgruntled hmmph the Doctor stepped aside, glaring at anyone unfortunate to cross his eye line. She gave the young man the benefit of her most charming smile.

'Look, I'm sorry about my friend, he's had a nasty shock quite recently and he's not over it yet.'

The server nodded.

'I think that what he wants to know is how these crowds got here.'

'Oh, they've come in from the Dobbin Mall.'

'Mall? Mall?' The Doctor's face was turning a deep shade of red.

'Yeah,' the boy continued, 'it got set up here about ten years ago, when the old owner sold up. Everyone wanted a piece of the place, but the new owners, Artemis Enterprises, wouldn't let the aristo types in. Just the big galactic chains, Mechadizzy, Gigamart, Liteyear, that sort. Said he wanted this place for the people.' The server leaned forward, having warmed to Mel. 'They reckon he's one of the trisilicate barons from the Arrandene Ice Wastes. You know, can't stand the old order so wants to overthrow it. Good thing too.'

'I'm sure,' replied Mel, 'so what's he like then?'

'Dunno, he never comes out. Very private man, but you can afford to be when you've got his money. Still, as long as he pays a decent wage even for the crap jobs like this I'm not knocking him.'

Mel gently laughed at that. Over centuries and light years one thing that never changed about people was their concern about their pay packet.

'Anyway, miss, do you want a kronkburger? Only if my super catches me gassing on to you she'll take one of my stars away. Extra large comes with a free Dalek pepperpot.'

The food Mel saw behind the server looked no more appetising than the fast food of the 1980s. 'Um, no, thanks.'

'No problem, miss, but can you clear off now? There's people waiting to be served and the super'll have my guts otherwise.'

She could see the 'super', a warty humanoid woman, watching intently and unhappily. The look, and the saliva dribbling down her chin, made Mel think that maybe having the server's guts would be quiet literal. She'd probably have them fried, like everything else in the café. Mel quietly shifted off to one side where the one-man storm cloud known as the Doctor was sulking.

'Any good?' she asked.

'Well, either he's lying or someone's doing a very good cover up job. For one thing the old owner of the place would never sell up. Didn't ever sell up.'

'Old friend?'

'About 940 years old.'

'But that's as old as…'

The Doctor raised an eyebrow.

'You?'

The Doctor nodded. 'Someone's trying to change history, Mel. The Bucephalus shouldn't be like this. I've been here later and it's all catastrophically wrong.'

'So what do we do about it?'

'We take the time honoured quickest route of meeting the people in authority.'

'You mean…'

'Yes, Mel, we get ourselves arrested.' And with an alarming degree of enthusiasm he marched off toward the entrance to the restaurant itself.

∞

Mel had done a lot of things during her adventures in time and space, but she had never been taken prisoner by a pantomime horse before. The kids who'd previously been tormenting the unconvincing animal impersonators had seemed to think it was all a great joke. All part of the circus to them. But then they hadn't seen the muzzle of the tiny blaster poke out of the fake hoof. Mel was still a little jumpy around guns, particularly when she was on the wrong end of one.

The Doctor, however, was quite the opposite – his mood was now positively euphoric. Whenever the horse started to turn he would become animated, bounding ahead and initiating a pointless monologue about the architecture and layout of the Bucephalus. The guards seemed quite put out by his cheery demeanour, unused to such an unnaturally co-operative captive. It seemed to Mel as if the Doctor was demonstrating his maxim that a gun does not necessarily give the upper hand in a situation. She wasn't sure if the horse

knew it yet though.

Fortunately the journey was a short one. Jabbing its hoof firmly in the Doctor's back the pantomime horse shoved them into an office that reeked of opulence. It was as if it had been designed to let visitors know that its occupant was considerably richer than they were. That occupant, an immaculately dressed tall fat man, dismissed the horse back to his duties with an elegant economic gesture.

'Well, now. Even with the… decline in standards of late, incidents of assault on the staff are extremely rare in the Bucephalus. Would you care to explain yourselves?'

The Doctor took charge. 'Certainly, Maître D'! My friend and I have been away from this sector for several years and we weren't aware of the… changes… to the Bucephalus. I thought our little protest might indicate our displeasure'

The Maître D's jowls quivered slightly. 'While one has some sympathy with you,' he said pleasantly, 'we cannot tolerate assaults on our staff.'

There was a buzz from the desk and a lifelike hologram sparkled into life, hovering above its surface. It was a miniature representation of a woman, whose manner and appearance indicated her secretarial status.

'One moment please.' The Maître D' listened as the secretary informed him of her master's wishes. 'Sir, madam, if you'll come with me. It appears that Mr Artemis has taken a somewhat dim view of your conduct and wishes to deal with the matter personally.'

∞

A short walk later they had arrived in an anteroom containing the larger real-life version of the secretary they had seen earlier. She ignored them; whatever menial task she was engaged in was clearly more important to her than visitors. The door behind her swung silently open and the Maître D' gestured them through before returning to his duties. He was, Mel noted, surprisingly quiet and graceful for such a large man.

The room they entered was dominated by a large wooden desk, behind which floated an executive chair that faced away from them. Held in place by an invisible force of some kind, it was flanked by an overly bulky humanoid to the left, and by an insectoid creature to the right. A trail of noxious cigar smoke rose gently from its as-yet-unseen occupant before being dispersed by the air purification systems.

'Mr Artemis, I presume?' enquired the Doctor.

The chair swung slowly round to reveal the chuckling figure of the Master.

'Artemis Enterprises – I should've known,' said the Doctor bitterly.

'Don't you see, Mel? Artemis, when translated from Ancient Greek into Old High Gallifreyan, transliterated into Modern Gallifreyan and then translated into English

becomes "Master".'

'So it's not just an anagram then?' asked Mel.

'No, Mel, the Master's aliases are often complex and subtle wordplays in our native language. Other tongues are just too crude to convey the nuances.' Mel raised a sceptical eyebrow at that.

'Your persistent foolishness never ceases to amaze even me, Doctor. I was hoping for so much better but you prove to be a continual disappointment.'

'I'm glad. So, what are you up to now? And why,' he nodded towards the Master's associates, 'are the Jadzillian and the Wine Lords of Chardon involved?'

'I would think it's obvious even to you what I'm doing here, Doctor. I'm running a business. Kraata here... ' he indicated the bulky humanoid, 'is my able assistant, and the Wine Lords are seeking to restore an unfairly maligned reputation.'

'Not your style though, is it? Meals for the masses? I don't think so!'

'It's quite simple. The Crystal Bucephalus is the most exclusive and renowned restaurant in the history of the universe. It's a beacon of sophistication for the rest of the cosmos – countless political treaties and business deals have been negotiated here by the great and the good. By franchising the restaurant and opening it up to the great unwashed I have removed that civilising influence. But there is still nowhere that's both neutral and safe enough to do business. With all of these peripheral distractions the conferences and meetings held in the restaurant's Cubiculos become easier to spy on and undermine; more open to manipulation by experts in the craft.'

'Experts such as yourself, no doubt.'

'Why, Doctor, you flatter me. But once a society's culture has been eroded, civilisation itself will eventually unwind. In a few short years the Concordance will be on the brink of anarchy and war.'

'And no doubt you'll be ready to step into the breach,' charged the Doctor bitterly.

'With the inside knowledge I've acquired here I can easily restore the restaurant's civilising influence.'

'By blackmailing all the different factions?'

'Precisely. I'll be a saviour to billions.'

'You know, your previous incarnation used to be so much more cultured than this. And he would at least made sure his paperwork was in order. Would you care to show me the deeds to your restaurant?'

'I don't need to have paperwork to run this place, Doctor. What matters is that people *believe* I am the new owner. Apparently the "previous" owner has never been seen, so my takeover didn't exactly stretch anyone's imagination.'

'You brainwashed them?'

'Of course,' the Master's smile thinned away, 'although if you do have the deeds they'd make my job even simpler.'

'You're talking to the wrong me, I'm afraid,' said the Doctor through gritted teeth.

'Yes, well, using this place does have another purpose, I suppose. Given the happy coincidence of your connection to the Crystal Bucephalus, I knew you wouldn't be able to resist barging in and demanding to see me. Which means that I can rid myself of you and Ms Bush without any of the usual foreplay.'

'Kraata,' he gestured to the hulking figure to his left, 'take them to Cubiculo 44. And please don't struggle, Doctor, humans such as Ms Bush are so delicate and easy to damage.'

The Doctor glared impotently at his old foe.

∞

They arrived at Cubiculo 44 in fairly short order. The iron grip and taciturn nature of Kraata allowed little possibility for escape; his lack of intelligence defeated all of the Doctor's attempts to reason with him. Opening the cubiculo door, he roughly shoved them in, causing the Doctor to crack his shin painfully against the table. He briefly hopped about clutching his damaged leg.

'Are you just going to hop around or are you going to help me find a way out of here?' asked Mel, busily checking the structure of their erstwhile prison.

'Could've broken my leg. Even Time Lords can't just regenerate legs you know,' he replied sulkily.

Mel looked up from the corner she'd been checking. 'If it was broken you wouldn't be moving.'

'Well, you never know.'

Mel shook her head at the haughty response and redoubled her efforts.

'As it happens,' he said, 'I do have an inkling of what to do.' With that he limped over to a panel that Mel hadn't even noticed, and slid it open, wiggled his fingers theatrically, and … stopped.

'Ah.'

'Ah?'

'Ah. As in ah, the Reality Quotient Selector has been disabled and the emergency return unit has been deactivated.' The Doctor poked around inside the panel, shying back just in time as his fiddling generated a shower of sparks. 'This is going to require some highly complex temporal reverse-engineering,' he gave Mel a wicked grin, 'and maybe a

little fiddling too.' He delved back into the panel, continuing his muffled monologue at Mel. 'Which means there's only going to be enough time for you to get out of here while I temporarily reverse the polarity of the neutron flow.'

'Why can't you permanently reverse it?'

'Because it will only be reversed while I'm here to complete the circuit. Besides, permanent reversal would cause the cubiculo to become unstable and explode. And you really don't want to get caught in a temporal explosion. You end up getting fried in perpetuity. Very nasty. Anyone in the Bucephalus will tell you that's not a good idea. And besides…' he paused for a particularly complex connection, 'this way you'll have an edge on the Master.'

'What kind of edge?'

'Oh,' the Doctor shrugged, I'm sure you'll work it out! No, go to the door and when I tell you, get out.'

Mel obeyed instantly.

'And… GO!'

As Mel pushed the doors open and squeezed through them she cast a glance back at the Doctor. The instruments he was fiddling with started to fizz and spark. He held them together for long as he dared then leapt back.

She saw the panel explode as the cubiculo door slid shut behind her.

∞

As the instrument panel exploded, leaving an ugly hole in the elegant stonework, a dark and dusty 1970s roadside café coalesced behind the Doctor. Its only occupants were a taciturn man in a dark grey suit, who peered over the top of his *Daily Express* to see what the commotion was, and the elegant woman in a bright blue dress that sat opposite him, looking slightly startled.

Picking himself up, the Doctor grinned at them.

'Do they do a cup of tea and a fry up here, then?'

∞

Mel tumbled onto the cold floor in an undignified heap. She should've known that a quiet evening out in her best posh frock with the Doctor would asking for trouble. Getting up, she smoothed her dress out, calmed herself and took note of her surroundings. It looked absolutely nothing like the place she'd departed from – it looked far less opulent, the dull red lighting and blunt square greyness of the place suggested that it might be a holding or a

quarantine cell of some kind. That made sense – if anything went wrong nothing was more likely to put people off their food than dead bodies or horrific injuries. Being a secure unit would explain why there was only one bulky looking door set behind a thick glass airlock. And, of course, the only control on her side was a keypad which didn't give any obvious clue as to how many digits were even in the combination. This left her with the option of waiting and hoping that instances such as guests dropping into security out of thin air were really important to the supposed "greatest restaurant the universe had ever known".

Fortunately for Mel the one thing that could be relied on in exclusive establishments – and formerly exclusive ones – like the Bucephalus was the solicitousness of the staff, whose training was far too deeply ingrained to be overcome by a few months of the Master's attempts to take the restaurant downmarket.

Mel bit back a scream when a figure that resembled an insect in a suit entered the quarantine area. She hadn't encountered that many aliens yet and still wasn't used to their appearances. Fortunately, once her analytical forebrain had overridden her hysterical hindbrain she realised that the insectoid "head" was actually a helmet and that, despite its body language and movement being quite different to anything she'd ever seen before, it was actually humanoid.

Not only was it humanoid, but it was dressed as the sort of waiter you'd find in The Ritz. That was something of a relief; anything that appeared human was easier to deal with, and anything that dressed as a human was easier still. The figure held a blocky grey device in its hand which flashed blue a few times as the creature consulted it. Satisfied with whatever results it presented the figure removed its helmet, tapped a series of figures into the control panel and waited for the door to slide open.

'Step this way if you'd be so kind, ma'am,' it said in tones precision-tooled to reassure. Unfortunately the bright silver eyes that had been concealed by the figure's helmet did little to reassure Mel.

She rose slowly, unsure if her heels had being damaged when she fell, and even more unsure of the "waiter's" purpose.

'Please hurry, ma'am. Our safety margins have been vastly reduced by the new management and we're trying to keep this area as clear as possible in case of emergencies.'

She edged past the figure, uncertain as to why it was so determined to reassure her.

'Please don't be alarmed, ma'am, I do not seek to harm you. If you come with me I'll show you to the green room while we investigate the problem with your cubiculo. Naturally, we'll provide you with a complimentary wine of your own choosing to compensate you for the inconvenience.'

'Please… could you be careful? My companion's trapped inside and I'd like to be

there when he gets out.'

'We shall be the models of care, ma'am; it should take our engineers but a few minutes to assess the damage and retrieve your friend. In the mean time, please accompany me and we'll do our very best to make up for the trouble you've been put to.'

Mel smiled gratefully. A glass of wine would go down rather well under the circumstances.

∞

'…and so there I was, surrounded by Zodin's army of mutant kangaroos; the lady herself poised to wipe out an entire continent for being vulgar, turning the skies permanently purple when I …'

Just as the Doctor reached the punchline of his anecdote there was a subtle shift as the dust and damp of a greasy spoon in winter gave way to the more elegant surroundings of the Crystal Bucephalus.

'I do apologise,' he said, dabbing a trace of egg away from the corner of his mouth with a napkin, 'but I'll let you know how this finishes some other time.'

The woman smiled politely while the man in the suit continued to pay more attention to the contents of his newspaper. The Doctor gulped down the last of his tea before sliding open the cubiculo doors, where he was met by one familiar face and a second unfamiliar one.

'Ah, my dear Mel,' he greeted her expansively, 'I knew I could rely on your powers of persuasion to return me safely. You'll have to introduce me to your New Mercurian friend though. I must admit most of the silver-eyed races I'm familiar with have more than two of them.'

He made to stride off, then half turned as Mel and her companion remained where they were. 'Well, come on, Mel. We've got to stop the Master. And time and tide wait for no man, not even a Time Lord!'

Mel hurried in front of him to block the Doctor's progress. 'Just hang on a second – there are a few things we need to explain . . .'

The Doctor listened as they led him out of the cubiculo and, without anyone in the café noticing, they all vanished into thin air.

∞

'I see, so you're telling me that none of the staff are co-operating with the Master's orders. Interesting…'

'Indeed, sir. We at the Bucephalus have spent our lives to maintain its galaxy-spanning reputation as the finest restaurant in history. None of us wish to see it spoiled by *that* upstart. Reputations take lifetimes to build, but only a moment to lose.'

Jervase, as the Mercurian waiter had introduced himself, appeared to be agitated more by the loss of the restaurant's reputation than any potential threat to universal harmony.

'Quite, a fact that the Master's allies have discovered to their cost... Jervase, I've a plan that will not only stop the Master's fiendish scheme but preserve the Bucephalus' reputation... '

He explained what he needed Jervase and the Bucephalus staff to do and the Mercurian had hurried off to follow his instructions to the letter.

'Mel,' he said conspiratorially, 'just remember, whatever you do, not to use my name – I'm not due to pay my first visit here for a good few years yet... '

'I thought you said you were the owner?'

'The perils of time travel. You'll get used to it!' His darker mood was lightened as an infectious grin spread across his face. 'Come on then Mel, there's a villain to be vanquished and reputations to be rescued.'

Mel grinned.

∞

Jervase grimaced as he and three of his fellow waiters, carrying a table, emerged on to the main concourse where dozens of economy-class diners had set up a camp while waiting for the next cubiculo to become available. The 'clientèle' attracted here by the new management's policies offended every one of his considerable senses. These people lacked the sense of smell and the aesthetics that came with wealth and nobility.

How any of them could remain so ugly when reconstructive surgery was available at such reasonable rates – *ugh*; and how any of them could remain so *poor*…

Still, Ms Bush's charming companion had insisted that this was the way to get rid of their nincompoop of an owner, so needs must when reputation drives.

Behind them, antigravity motors whirred to a halt as they set their cargo down and Jervase's fellow waiters set about extracting bottles from the cellar that the Wine Lords had brought to the Bucephalus.

He cleared his throat loudly.

'Ladies and gentlemen! Your attention, please! In recognition of the vast distances you've travelled to dine at our fine establishment, the management wishes to present you all with a gift.'

Jervase carefully enunciated his next few words to be sure that the rabble would understand just how lucky they were. 'At great expense, we have imported a complimentary selection of the finest wines in known history for you to sample and enjoy as part of your dining experience. If you would be so kind as to form an orderly line, we will endeavour to provide a bottle for each and every one of you.'

Few in the crowd had heard much beyond the word 'complimentary' and soon their impromptu stall was under siege. Jervase smoothly extracted himself from the throng – after all it would do not good for him to be seen working – and calmly waited, watching the Wine Lords' finest bounty wasted on those who wouldn't have known the difference if they had been drinking vinegar.

∞

The Master leaned back in his chair, smoking happily on a fine Neocuban cigar. With the Doctor and Mel marooned in time, untold wealth and power were about to become his. All that remained was to get the Wine Lords out the way – they had been a useful source of financial backing for his scheme – desperate species were so easy to convince. Too bad they worked out that their reputation would sink even lower when his plans came to fruition.

'Sir,' said the Maître' D, interrupting his reverie, 'we have a situation.'

'I thought I told you not to disturb me. You would do well to listen to my instructions in future.'

'Indeed, sir. This, however, is a pressing matter that requires your most urgent attention. There is something of a disturbance on the concourse.'

The Master frowned. 'Patch the vidfeed through.'

A holographic copy of the main concourse appeared, accurate in every detail, right down to the refracted light of the magnificent crystalline horse. The Master could see what appeared to be a mad scramble in the corner for something. It couldn't be… the Wine Lords would never let their precious vintages be poured down the undiscerning throats of customers like *those*. It was too early to be breaking out the wine just yet. Still...

'Maître D', are the Wine Lords holding a tasting session outside?'

'Not to my knowledge, sir.'

'Then find out exactly why they're giving their most prized wines away to that rabble!'

'I can help you there.'

What? The Doctor's voice? But…

'Down here.' The hologram of the concourse had vanished, only to be replaced

by the dinner-suited form of his most hated foe.

'Ah, Doctor,' he purred, the status quo had been re-established a lot sooner than he had anticipated, 'I should have known my little trap wouldn't hold you for long.'

'Indeed you should. I've a proposal to make concerning this place.'

'You're in no position to bargain, Doctor.'

'I am when you have dissatisfied staff threatening industrial action. You know your reforms haven't gone down too well with them.' The Doctor was grinning impishly in a fashion that irritated the Master immensely.

'*What?* They do what I tell them. I am the Master.'

'They're clearly made of sterner stuff. They've asked that you consider me to be their union representative. Meet me by cubiculo 1 in an hour. Only the best table in the finest restaurant will do for such a negotiation.'

The Master snarled as the holographic vidfeed winked out. So close, and now the Doctor was ready to thwart him again. Next time he would just kill the Doctor outright...

∞

The Master, accompanied by Kraata, arrived at the appointed cubiculo where he found the Doctor lounging insolently and talking to his companion.

'Doctor, what is the meaning of this?'

The Doctor turned as if he'd just noticed the Master. 'Extra muscle for the negotiation, I see. Very sensible! Shall we step inside?'

'You and the delightful Ms Bush first, Doctor. And no tricks!'

'Oh, tricks are very much your department, Master!' he said, opening the cubiculo door for his companion before gesturing for the Master and Kraata to follow. Inside, the Doctor took a seat on the opposite side of the cubiculo as the Bucephalus faded away to be replaced by a bright white room with plastic seating, overlooked by a model of a clown in the far corner.

'McDonald's, Zeta Minor. I thought it the safest place to conduct negotiations,' smiled the Doctor annoyingly. 'Nobody ever comes here.'

'What's this about the staff, Doctor? Are you seriously suggesting that my entire workforce has the capacity to resist my will?'

'Ah, well that's always been your big failing, hasn't it? You've never taken account of the little people. These people were recruited for their passion. *By me.* Hypnosis can only go so far, and I made sure that resistance to mind control is a prerequisite for every job description. It didn't take long for them to return to normal.'

'I pay them a more than reasonable wage, they *will* obey me.'

'Ah, but for these people money isn't everything. They'd rather die than sell their reputation.'

'So be it. That will be their choice when I return. I can always hire new staff.'

'Oh, I don't think so,' the Doctor turned to Mel. 'It seems that negotiations have broken down already, doesn't it? Still, it's a fine night for a walk…'

With that the Doctor offered his arm to Mel, who accepted it graciously, and made for the exit. 'We'll be back when you've calmed down.'

The Master waited until they had turned the corner of the restaurant, a grin curling his lips upward. 'I don't think so, Doctor.'

He slid the owner's cubiculo recall device from his pocket and flamboyantly pressed the button, ready to be transported back the Bucephalus where he would end this ridiculous staff rebellion once and for all.

Nothing happened.

He stabbed repeatedly at the button; surely there must be some mistake. Still nothing.

And from around the corner came the sounds of a TARDIS dematerialising.

'The gentleman asked me to give you this after he'd gone,' an acne-ridden Zeta-Minoran in an ill-fitting McDonald's crew uniform said as he handed the Master a note embossed with the Seal of Rassilon. The Master opened it and quickly scanned it before screwing it up and hurling it to the floor.

'And he also said you might need this, since it's the sort of meal you seem to want.'

The server passed him a wafer thin slice of meat pressed in a stale looking bap, a tiny bag of fries and a bucket of fizzy brown liquid. He then retreated quickly; he might have been poorly paid, but he wasn't stupid.

'Doctor, I swear by Rassilon's beard you'll pay for this!' He looked wildly around, the unfortunate Kraata being the only being in his way. 'Don't just sit there, you dolt, do something!'

'Do what, boss?'

The Master turned on his heel in anger. Next time he would employ a subordinate with an ounce of brain instead of a ton of muscle.

∞

Jervase smiled as the TARDIS materialized back on the near empty Bucephalus concourse. Ms Bush and her companion had been as good as their word. He almost cracked his face into a smile as they stepped out.

'Welcome back. Sir, ma'am.'

'Ah, Jervase, you're rid of Mr Artemis. He won't be back for quite some time. At least seven centuries by the fastest possible route.'

'Excellent, sir, and the Wine Lords?'

'Oh, the Wine Lords won't be any trouble. If word gets out of what they've attempted that trade embargo will just be extended indefinitely. I'm sure you know the right sort of people to do that!'

Jervase inclined his head. 'Indeed Doctor. And how shall we deal with the Maître D' and the others?'

'Oh, I'll simply de-hypnotise them! If the Master can hypnotise him then it'll be child's play to return him to normal. Typical of the Master not to check on his staff's mental well-being before meeting me. It would have spared him so much embarrassment.'

'Very true, sir. We're very grateful for your help. And how can we thank you?'

'Oh, no thanks needed, is there, Mel? We wouldn't dream of putting you out!'

'Well, actually... '

∞

Back in the TARDIS control room the Doctor was distinctly unhappy 'Salad? How could you order me... *rabbit food*... like that?'

'Got to get you back on your diet, Doctor, you've been eating very badly over the last few days.'

'It was one small fry-up... ' he protested despairingly.

'It's bad for you.' Mel walked round and poked him in the stomach.

'I'm sure there's an extra inch or two that wasn't there before.'

The Doctor pulled his jacket round his waist protectively. Dictators and would-be rulers he had no problem with, but the iron will of Melanie Bush was a truly implacable foe.

Tears in Time

Damon Cavalchini

Choices. It all comes down to choices. I never met Craig Hinton in the flesh. But, as a young man, he helped me make the essential choice of what to read before bed through his Shelf Life *column in* Doctor Who Magazine. *I still remember the feeling of anticipation when the newsagent would ring and say that a new copy had arrived. Getting into the car, picking up my copy from behind the counter and flicking eagerly through the pages.* Gallifrey Guardian. *The reviews and previews. And, of course,* Shelf Life.

Later I had the chance to meet Craig online. We never became friends. He probably wouldn't even have known my name. But his ideas, his thoughts, his life helped shape my appreciation of the Sixth Doctor. In my mind, it's Craig's Sixth Doctor from Millennial Rites, The Quantum Archangel *and* Synthespians™ *which captured the potential of Colin Baker's portrayal.*

Unlike the soap operaesque epics Craig liked, this story is a simple little human interlude. But it does feature beings from the universe before this one, a more reflective Sixth Doctor who is well aware of and fighting against his mortality and the sense of hope and possibility which permeated so much of Craig's writings (both fiction and non-fiction).

Marcus Swindon smiled as he descended the steps. The faint murmuring of the Christmas party he had just left lingered on in his consciousness, a reminder of the world above. Distantly, an angry and unforgiving techno beat merged with the wailing of lonely silver bells. Hidden in the layers of the track, the temporary fame of a current chart sensation faded in and out of existence.

Approaching his fortieth birthday, Swindon had begun to wonder about his future. Long days – and nights – of youthful wildness were now behind him, as he prepared to lap them on the racetrack of conservatism... Or so he had thought.

Until tonight. Stealing a glance behind him, Marcus felt the familiar tingle of planned conquest conga along his spine. She was beautiful: a classic visage dragged from the depths of his imagination and made real – and she wanted him. As soon as she saw him, she wanted him. Marcus quickly forgot his boredom, the reflective emptiness which had preoccupied him so recently just dropping away.

Soft-pile carpet covered the floor of the sunken room, inviting Marcus to lie down. It burned as his naked back rubbed against it, as he moved in anticipation. A touch of silk caressed his chest as the woman knelt above him, her hips gently swaying as she moved up and down across his upper body.

For a second, Marcus thought the darkened room was clothed in a brilliant light which covered his nakedness. This woman, this mysterious stranger who was reshaping his life on a single night, was silhouetted in a harsh flash of revealing whiteness. A feeling of unease tried to force its way into Marcus' consciousness but, as if the woman were aware of the feeling, skin touched his skin and all else was forgotten. Skin, pale, smooth and cold as ice, burnt its presence into his memory.

Once again the light flared like an explosion of lightning and, this time, Marcus caught a hint of an exotic fragrance in the air.

Then he fell into joy.

∞

Time danced as her sister, Decay, devoured Marcus Swindon. They had both been born in the death throes of the old universe. Yet while Time found her place in this new life, her sister wandered alone and unchampioned. For countless ages, she wandered from planet to planet, idly exploring new star systems, searching for something, anything, to satisfy the ennui which inevitably followed immortality. And as she wandered, she gorged her need for sustenance from the flesh and souls of those around her.

Having stripped Marcus' clothing from him, she continued to strip his body, molecule by molecule, drinking in each explosion, each subatomic death. His destruction rippled out like the shockwave after a stone thrown into still water. An unimaginable series of splintered futures, cascading and collapsing upon themselves until, in one perfect moment, they would all recombine to form the egg of a new beginning.

Those who say any event has an infinite number of outcomes do not understand the reality of eternal mathematics. All events have a finite number of following events. There is always a point at which you finally exhaust all possibilities, probabilities, improbabilities and impossibilities. But the law of avatars meant there must still be something remaining for the outcome to be infinite.

So any event has a finite number of eventualities.

And, if they are finite, they must also be definable.

And if you can define something, you can choose it.

Decay felt the deep chill of winter as she emerged from the party. Her lust sated, she barely sensed the gentle drizzle of grey sludge around her. Neon lights glowed, casting an artificial pall over the hundreds of people rushing about to complete their Christmas chores. Those praying for a white Christmas would have to settle for the cruel grey of dirty sleet. Not that it worried the woman. Indeed her body seemed to cause the mist of rain falling around her to turn to steam, leaving her physical perfection untouched.

'It's so easy, isn't it?'

She spun around. Somehow she had failed to sense bulky man in the outrageous coat, gods how could not have seen that, as he walked up behind her.

'We're all going to die one day, after all. I know I am.' He seemed to stop as if he had only just realised the implications of what he was saying in such a cheerful booming tone.

'Do you know,' he continued, running his hand through his moist, curly, blond hair. 'there are a people somewhere out there who believe they sing the universe into existence every morning. No, no, it sounds mad, but it's true: there are such people. Without their song, the legends say, eternity would collapse and fade into nothingness. Thus for more than twelve hundred years the people woke up and sang the same song over and over again. One morning one of the singers sang a different note. Bored with the repetitious sameness, some of the singers rebelled and wondered why they had to sing the same song, to call the same universe into being each morning, instead of creating something new, something different.'

Again he stopped talking and Decay realised she had been waiting on his every word. For the first time in ages she wanted to know how a story ended.

Abruptly the man swung round to face her.

'I wanted to become a hermit once, y'know. I wanted to stare out into the endless possibilities of time and distance myself from the responsibility of action. For once in my life I wanted events to pass me by instead of having to delve in and muck around with saving the universe. After the third or fourth solar system owes you its very existence it all gets a bit stale.'

He pulled an ice cream from the depths of one of his pockets. Mesmerised, Decay just shook her head when he offered her a bite.

'Choc top with a hint of mint,' he said, temptingly. 'My favourite.'

Decay stared. The ice cream appeared to have remained frozen, mysteriously preserved, within the pockets of the patchwork coat. She couldn't believe it. To have such power and to waste it on snack food?

'Of course, I couldn't just walk away,' the stranger continued, munching away happily. 'I mean how would the universe cope without me to clean up the mess?'

He stopped at a metal bin and placed his wrapper carefully inside the open hole. Flakes of green paint peeled away as his sleeve brushed the rough surface, revealing the rusted layer below. Decay shivered.

'That's choice for you,' he said simply. 'Everything we are is defined by the choices we make. Put the rubbish in the bin or let another piece of litter fall to ground, adding to the inevitable moment when the garbage rises and swallows humanity. I know some people

who are too afraid to make choices, to accept the burden of decision, and who prefer to live in glass towers, isolated from the chaos of life around them.'

On the other side of the road Decay saw a young couple paused to glance nervously at the strange man who had raised his voice, shouting at the heavens.

'They sit back, terrified of doing what they know must be done, and try to absolve themselves by blaming others when they don't act to make things better. Don't interfere. Don't intervene. Let nature take her course. And punish those who try, however ineffectively, to rail against the tyranny of predetermination!'

Just another lonely drunk wandering the streets, Decay could sense the young couple deciding as they hurried away, their bags full of presents swaying in the wind. Someone to be forgotten, they were feeling, someone to be hidden from polite awareness.

"Well, I won't accept it!' the man yelled at the stars above. 'No matter how many times you condemn me, no matter how many times you deny my choice, deny my right to choose, I will be me. Cry havoc and – '.

His passionate speech burnt out as suddenly as it had started. For the first time the woman was able to look directly at him. Despite his youthful appearance, the stranger had an aura of ancient times surrounding him. When he spoke again it was with a quiet voice, almost pleading for forgiveness.

'I'm going to die, you know. I don't know why, but this time, and I don't mind admitting it, I'm frightened of it. I've tried running. I've tried hiding. But Time reaches out and drags me back onto the path she's chosen for me. All my lives I've tried to do the right thing, to reduce the suffering of those around me. But this time I just want to live a little bit longer. Just long enough to have my moment in the sun before I fall, smouldering to ground, like Icarus.'

She placed a sympathetic hand on his shoulder and he smiled as they continued down the road.

'I love Christmas, don't you?' he asked. 'There's something hopeful about it. A feeling that no matter what we have done everything is going to be alright. Presents. Mistletoe. Holly. Joy and goodwill to all men, and all that.'

The man turned to look at Decay, his silent gaze scorching her immortal soul. 'Can't you feel it? Can you sense the hope and happiness? That sense of, yes, being an individual, but still belonging to a greater whole? That wonderful *je ne sais quoi* of the Christmas season, and being alive in it?'

Stunned, the woman shook her head in bewilderment.

Like a little child denied his favourite treat, the stranger petulantly stuffed his hands into the marvellous pockets. 'I'm sorry. It seems like I'm always interfering in something. I can't help myself.'

'Tell me the end of the story,' Decay demanded, scared, for the first time in millennia, that she wouldn't know the outcome.

He sighed. 'Why does everyone always want to know the ending in advance, rather than enjoying the tale along the way? Why can't people just live the tale instead of being desperate to be… spoilered?'

'What happened,' she insisted, 'when the song changed? What happened?'

'Annihilation.'

Shocked, she snatched her hand away from his shoulder.

'The sky fell in, the waters rose and heavens roared with terror. That one out of place note and the Universe died.' Seeing the look of horror on her face, the man continued. 'Of course, it only died for them. And there are those who believe that the disaster was a natural one, something about the effects of an asteroid hitting the planet or some such rubbish. But the fact remains that in that instant everything changed.'

'They died,' he continued. 'And maybe we did too. Maybe they called another universe into life with a different history, different rules, different choices – ' he paused before continuing pointedly, ' – different people.'

This time it was the woman who stopped and looked nervously around her.

'Surely, they didn't understand what they were doing?'

'It was still their choice.'

'But – '.

'You don't belong here,' the stranger said accusingly. 'You're a bad note in this planet's symphony. If you want to believe in the people who chanted the universe into existence every sunrise, then you must believe that every day is a fresh start. There's always a fresh chance to make the same mistakes, or an opportunity to give in that one more time. But you can't run away forever. Believe me, I know. Life or death. Honour or disgrace. Chocolate or strawberry. Eventually you have to make a choice and live with it.'

The two of them had reached a blue box standing incongruously on the pavement. The man reached out and offered Decay his hand.

She shook it.

'This is where I must depart, I'm afraid.'

He opened the door to the box.

'Choose wisely,' he said, as the door shut behind him.

∞

Somewhere in the depths of the universe, far away from Earth, is a planet. A dead planet. Once it had been enveloped in a cloak of oxygen and life-sustaining gases. Now the cloak

was threadbare and faded, and the deadly heat of a nearby star scorched the surface. All traces of the civilisation that had walked upon its surface had been obliterated. In almost thirty thousand years, not a single living had touched the dust of this floating rock in space. Indeed, it was hard imagine anything had once lived amongst the desolate and barren landscape.

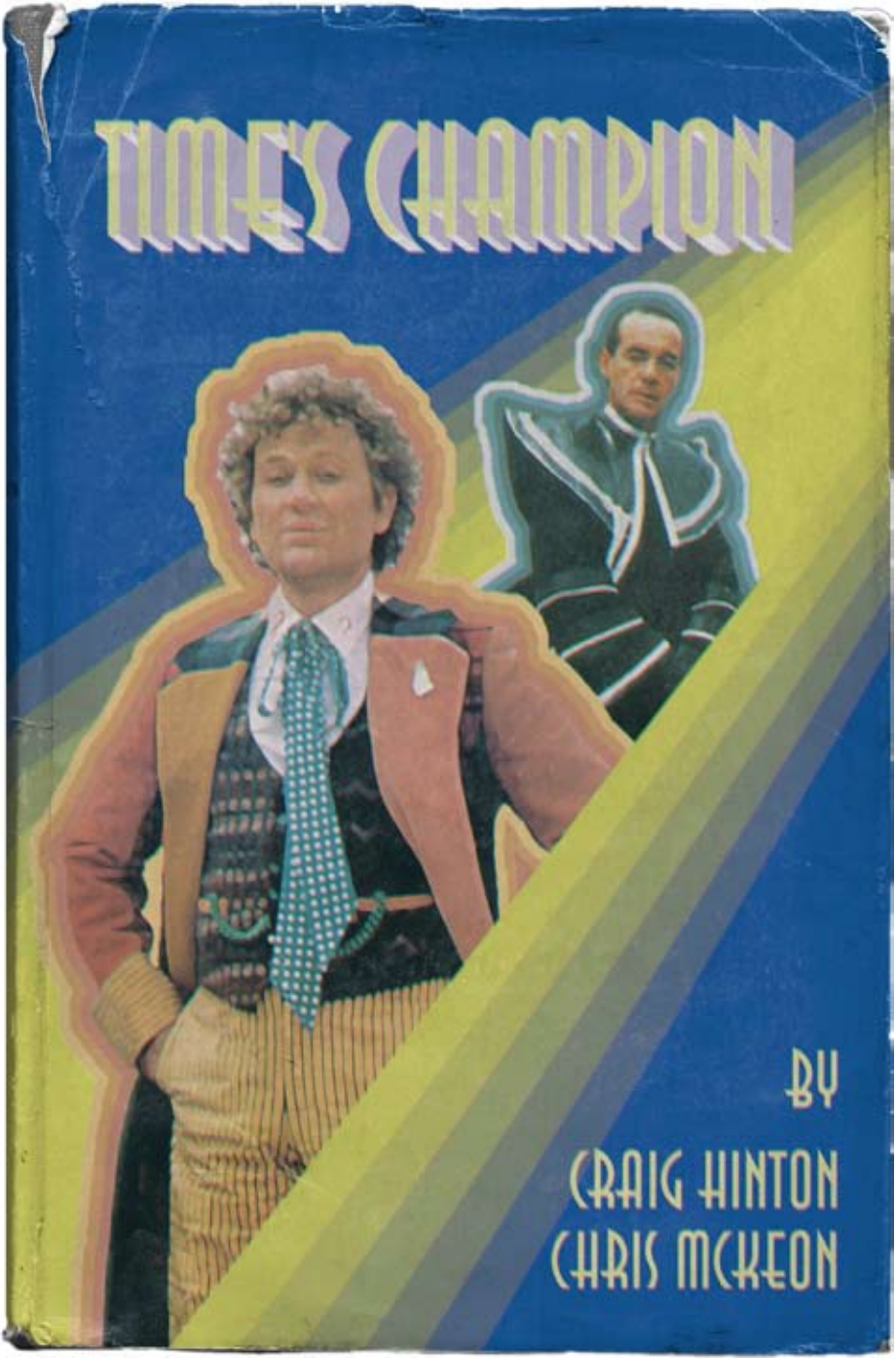
Yet every morning as the sun prepared to unleash another barrage of radiation against the surface of the planet a machine came to life.

It was an old tape recorder left there by an alien in police box.

Decay turned and waited for sameness, the repetition, she had come to embrace.

Every morning, as she watched patiently, the sun's warm fingers would reach over the horizon, hit the recorder and trigger the play mechanism.

And the voices of the dead would begin to chant the universe into existence once more.


TIME'S CHAMPION
BY
CRAIG HINTON
CHRIS MCKEON

Time's Champion – Prologue

Craig Hinton and Chris McKeon

Craig intended Time's Champion *to be the third part of his 'Sixth Doctor Trilogy,' and to be his regeneration story. The story was proposed to and accepted by BBC Books in 2002, but subsequently put 'on the shelf' when* Synthespians™ *was commissioned. In the meantime another Sixth Doctor regeneration story,* Future Nostalgia *by Gary Russell, was accepted in June 2004. This became* Spiral Scratch*, which was subsequently published in 2005.*

When he heard the news, Craig was disappointed, but philosophical: 'At least the Sixth Doctor's era was closed by one of the four people - me, Gary, Steve Lyons and Justin – who understood what made the character and Mel tick and were responsible for his rehabilitation.'

Two years before his death Craig had written the first chapter of Time's Champion*, and this, along with the notes Craig prepared in 2001 and various brief passages, is all that he wrote. In the months leading up to his death Craig began announced that the book would be written and published for those fans who wanted to see it. His collaborator, Chris McKeon, has committed to complete the book – to which the following prologue forms the introduction – in Craig's memory.*

All Faith is false, all Faith is true:
Truth is the shattered mirror strown
In myriad bits; while each believes
His little bit the whole to own.
– Sir Richard Francis Burton

From the journal of George McKenzie Trench, 1901

I like to think of it as *The Machine.*

But how can a single word encapsulate all that is, all that will be, all than *can* be? Many of my peers prefer a livelier word – the *Multiverse.* And yes, I suppose it is much more vibrant and inspiring, a perfect term for their penny dreadfuls and gothic fancies. But perhaps I see more clearly than most.

But *Machine* is the more apt image for this multi-faceted macrocosm in which we live; after all, with so many distinct and, more often than not, dramatically different planes of existence that coexist peacefully and, most importantly, invisibly, it is a feat of marvellous continuity and sublime brilliance: the clockwork of the Gods themselves. Truly,

The Machine.

Some say (from experience perhaps?) that if one were to view the entire working scope of creation at once that one would undeniably conclude that there was an intelligence, a *Creator*, behind the heavenly Machine. Of course, to come to such a conclusion, one would have to assume the existence of God already.

Let us assume that such a God (or indeed Gods, in a Pantheon of such beings) exists then, positioned perfectly in its Heaven, overseeing the Machine of the Multiverse as it functions in perfect, agreeable harmony. A custodian and watchmaker in one, tending the mechanicals of existence itself. Now, that is easy enough.

What is not so easy is that assumption as to what that Supreme Being or His Pantheon must have felt on the day when the Machine broke down and The War began. Yet even as difficult as imagining such feelings may be, what I still find almost impossible to imagine is that the Gods themselves must have, in their wisdom, caused that very breakdown. The Machine, The Multiverse, is a construction of sublime and supreme intelligence: it sits above the very nature of all things, yet is itself the quintessence of all things. It is Their plan, writ large. And for it to stutter, to halt, to grind towards inexorable oblivion, that must reflect the whims and caprices of those that sit in judgement above all. For they are perfection incarnate. For the Machine to be imperfect, that imperfection must be essential to their glorious Plan. And the War in Heaven is nothing more than the adjustment necessary to set things aright.

If life and time and space and thought and love are breaking down, then this is Their Will. And if Heaven must do battle to restore all that is, then that is also Their Will.

How long they have planned for this moment is unimportant: there is no timetable in Heaven since Time itself is Theirs to bend and rend. Why the Gods executed Their design is similarly unimportant — one cannot yet comprehend the mind of the Gods, and I dare to say that we will never be granted that *gift*.

What is important to understand is that once the Gods determined that the War was necessary for the welfare of their Machine, the debate was over. The Gods had made their agreement, for all their right and unfathomable reasons.

But, although no one can or dare fathom the mind of the Gods and their reasons are Their own, I can tell you one thing with authority. Amongst all their reasons, the Gods agreed to wage the War because of a singular disagreement: indeed, their very first since the first stars flared in the firmament. And this is the most important thing to know because they disagreed about you, Doctor. In every respect, in every possible and conceivable way. You were anathema, Doctor.

But that cannot be said of your twin...

Pierrot le Who?

Andrew K Lawston

From the outset, I was keen that my story should pay tribute to Craig and his work on more than one level. The Doctor and Ace explore the wider world of Millennial Rites *(my favourite of Craig Hinton's novels), but they begin their quest from Warwick University. Craig and I are both Warwick alumni, if not contemporaries, and the original outline was set far more firmly in the West Midlands.*

Pierrot le Who? *also reflects Craig's fondness for exploring intricate details of* Doctor Who*'s history. The Doctor's arc in this story is the 'fanwankiest' thing I could think of, and I hope Craig would have approved. Also, Craig's novels were full of Lovecraft references, among others. While I have no knowledge of Lovecraft's writing whatsoever, I hope I reflected this in the homage to my own favourite film.*

'After the age of fifty, Velasquez never again painted definite objects.' The scholar's delivery was nasal and shrill, but his voice carried to the back of the lecture theatre, where the universe's most *perpetual* perpetual student sat.

There was a slow series of clicks and whirs as a stream of slides rumbled through the ancient projector – alternating between long-shots of portraits full of apparently detailed fabrics and facial hair; and close-ups where all the detail resolved into almost childish daubs and swirls of paint.

The Doctor stifled a yawn.

'If you're bored too, what are we *doing* here?' Ace was at her most petulant, carving her name deep into the bench in front of her with her red penknife. 'Four days of fine art and cinema lectures in the one place duller than Perivale?' she paused, and eyed her friend suspiciously. 'You're not on a Time Lord hourly rate, are you?'

'Education is never wasted,' the Doctor replied primly, although Ace noticed his notepad was full of letters he'd been writing to himself. 'Mel assured me that Warwick University is *the* most prestigious seat of learning in this era. And where better to study cinema than at a university named after an Ewok?'

Ace opened her mouth, but the Doctor was wearing that quiet little smile of his. 'Okay, Professor,' she said, raising her hands in defeat. 'But I can't listen to any more of this rubbish on an empty stomach.'

∞

Tile Hill Campus refectory was light and airy, thanks to the massive windows that dominated its back wall. But it was used mostly by teacher training students and the atmosphere was one of muted despair. A gaggle of seven or eight was sitting at a table nearby, hunched over a pile of worksheets and folders in stress-induced misery. As the Doctor handed Ace her bacon sandwich, he fancied he could almost hear the twangs of their spirits breaking, one by one.

She had demanded answers, of course, and he was doing his best to give them – he was in a good mood. But how did you even begin to explain quantum mnemonics to someone with a brown sauce moustache?

He took a sip from his glass of water and steepled his hands under his chin. 'On New Year's Eve 1999, central London was turned inside out, transformed into a "Great Kingdom" by a magic spell.'

Ace's eyes widened. 'Uh maguh spuh?'

The Doctor flicked a piece of bacon rind from his cheek with his paisley scarf. 'Well, quite. A series of accidents caused a conflict between the physical laws of three universes. I resolved matters as neatly as possible, with a measure of help from a God from the future. But Saraquazel only had a limited awareness of this universe's higher dimensions, and it seems the effects of the disruption spread further than we'd thought. As far as Coventry, 2003, in fact.'

Mercifully, Ace swallowed before starting on her inevitable questions.

'How can you tell?'

'First, the readings I picked up in the TARDIS. Second is the fact that the Great Kingdom was sculpted partly by the dying brain of a mutated former computer programmer and art enthusiast named Derek Peartree.'

Ace snapped her fingers in excitement. 'That's the name of that lecturer! Professor, what are we waiting for? Let's get him!'

The Doctor rolled his eyes. 'Ace, what do you think we've been *doing* here? You said it yourself, we've had four days of nothing but cinema and art history lectures. No possessed students, no furtive rites in cellars, no beacons to guide invasion fleets in to land on the M42. Just a very dull man who happens to have returned from the dead.'

Ace frowned again. The Doctor fought the urge to mop her face with his hankie. 'So we can go? There's no problem?'

'Well, we *could*,' the Doctor replied. 'But I expect you'll want to find out why you're eating a raw trout.'

There was an audible thud as Ace dropped her 'bacon' roll decisively. She looked down and clamped her hand to her mouth as, sure enough, a sightless fish eye stared up at her blindly, its head poking jauntily from the floured bap.

As she tried not to throw up on the spot, Ace became aware of a change in atmosphere. She looked up to see the light had faded from the giant windows. Instead, crude torches along the walls were compensating by casting guttering orange light across rough wooden benches and a reed-lined floor.

At least the trainee teachers' spirits had lifted, she noted, as two of the hunch-shouldered golden shapes leapt from their benches and into wobbly flight towards the exit, necks stretched impossibly long and tails swishing out through the room.

She saw the Doctor watching her impassively, gauging her reactions. She fought down her revulsion and faced him calmly. 'You could see this all along.'

'When I concentrated, yes.' The Doctor was unapologetic, and in spite of herself Ace was smiling. The world was wrong again and she felt the adrenaline kick in as she relished the battle to come.

'This is just a ripple,' the Doctor continued. 'This reality lies like the thinnest veneer over your world. It's a symptom of a far deeper problem.'

Ace shouldered her rucksack, and stared down one of the former trainee teachers, who had been regarding her speculatively. 'Where to then, Professor?'

The Doctor tossed a coin into the air and slapped it on to the back of his hand. He didn't bother looking at it. 'London. Canary Wharf, or thereabouts.'

∞

Naively, they'd planned to catch the bus to Coventry station, but both the car park and the road had become a tar pit, a single blue Nissan Micra still sinking gently into the depths. Ace remembered the trouble she'd had getting to the student union the night they'd arrived.

'It was a rubbish bus, anyway.'

The Doctor sighed, opening his umbrella to fend off a diving attack from an armour-plated dragonfly. 'It's a forty-five minute stroll, and basic topology seems unaffected. We can walk via Earlsden and call in at the City Arms. Check the radius of the effects.'

Ace looked into the gloom beyond the torches. A hilly wilderness of thick scrub lay ahead, punctuated by piles of rubble where sinister blue shapes crawled. She had a thought. 'The pub won't have changed?'

The Doctor tutted. 'Ace, we're in Warwickshire. If quantum mnemonics can distort Wetherspoons, then the world's probably past saving.'

∞

Half an hour later, the Doctor and Ace sprinted round the corner of a turquoise pyramid

– and were nearly flattened by an elderly man in an electric buggy.

Stars exploding in front of her eyes, Ace doubled over panting for breath, while the Doctor took in the utterly unremarkable sights of Earlsden High Street in broad daylight, muttering to himself and waving his hat cheerily at anyone who caught his eye.

'What – were – they?' Ace gasped.

'The ones with wings are auriks,' the Doctor explained. 'And the blue pointy fellows are cybrids. They're unpredictable, I must say. Four years ago, they were controlled by the Technomancer, at least to an extent. These effects seem to be inherently unstable.'

'And what are the small lizard things with the three inch teeth and six legs?'

The Doctor frowned and scratched his head. 'I've no idea. Where did you see those?'

'There's one crawling up your trousers.'

∞

Ace was still laughing when they reached the pub and claimed a booth near the window. She continued to snigger as the Doctor went to the packed bar, and she was still smirking when he returned with a couple of glasses. She raised an eyebrow at the two pints of real ale that the Time Lord plonked down.

'Were they out of bloody water, then?' she asked archly.

Her friend just smiled. 'No, no, but when in Rome, do what the humans do.' He threw back half his pint in a single gulp and sighed contentedly. 'A fine pint of Fox's Nob. Drink up, Ace, it'll put hairs on your vest.'

Ace took a decorous sip and raised her best Roger Moore eyebrow a second time. 'You are being well weird this afternoon, Professor.'

The Doctor's face flushed red and he slammed his pint on to the table. 'Professor?' he roared. 'Professor! I am the Doctor, young lady. The definitive article. And I can certainly metabolise a few more glasses of fermented hops than any ape-descended humanoid.'

Ace could never bear to be shouted at, but something was wrong. While the Doctor's face had darkened to crimson, he was sweating so profusely that his brown curly hair seemed to be lightening.

'I think he's saying,' interjected a shaggy-haired old drunk with eyes full of broken dreams and a face full of broken veins. 'That he can drink you under the table.'

'No!' yelled the Doctor. 'I can drink *all* of you under the table. One at a time or all at once. Excuse me.'

With his last words, the Doctor put his hands behind his head and brought them down so that he butted the table savagely.

Ace had had enough. She scrambled over to the Doctor's side, ignoring the shocked murmurs from the other drinkers, ready to restrain him if necessary. But even as she caught his head on the rebound, it *changed*.

Ace sat back down heavily to face a curly-haired blond stranger in the brightest coat she'd seen since Notting Hill. He stared at her haughtily, green eyes glinting with a cruel edge. Then he winked and took a deep swig of beer. 'Ah, yes, quantum mnemonics. Did I mention the effects will also ripple through time?'

'Doctor?'

'You were expecting someone else? Now, there's no point taking the train, we need to be able to travel under our own steam.' The stranger was eyeing the fruit machine keenly. He held out a hand, palm-first. 'Change!' he demanded imperiously.

Dumbly, Ace handed him a couple of quid. He beamed widely. 'Not a moment too soon!'

Five minutes later, the Doctor had lost all their money in the one-armed bandit. So he threw a piece of chocolate fudge cake in the old drunk's face while Ace pinched his wallet.

∞

Standing in the park next to Henry VIII Boys' School, the Doctor and Ace looked out over Coventry City Centre. There were several huge swathes of grey desolation choking the landscape. The rest was clearly part of the Great Kingdom.

The Doctor was fidgeting and restless as they looked out over the chaos. Eventually, he turned to his friend. 'Do you trust me, Ace? You know I have the ability to regenerate.'

Ace shrugged, but couldn't quite meet his eyes. 'I'd... kind of gathered, yeah. Glitz and the Brigadier and that.'

'This is the body I had back in 1999. It's a good sign, really, confirms we're just dealing with the aftershocks of what happened at ACL. Still, we have to get to London. This distortion, unchecked, will spread until it chokes this whole planet with magic and feudalism. Humanity will be reduced to a huge live-action role-playing arena!'

'It's time we quit this rotten town, anyway.'

The Doctor looked down at Ace, and smiled gently. 'No wonder he loves you so.'

Together they got into the hired Audi and drove away.

As they left Coventry, they passed the statue of Lady Godiva, who saluted two kindred spirits.

∞

An hour later, they'd travelled about ten miles. The car had hit one of the distorted patches and suddenly they'd been back in the apparently perpetual twilight of the Great Kingdom. The road, such as it was, was uneven and treacherous, so progress was slow. A quantum storm raged silently overhead, bathing the travellers in beams of red and blue light.

Ace was driving. 'So how does this work? The world changes, but the car stays the same. And so do we.'

The Doctor snorted. 'Speak for yourself,' he said, adjusting the lapels of his jacket. 'Still, it seems I got off lightly.' He furtively rubbed his cat badge as he spoke, glancing sideways to check Ace hadn't noticed.

'Don't moan, Professor,' was all she said.

'Call me the Doctor,' he replied sulkily.

Ace rolled her eyes and turned on the radio before the Doctor could tell her not to bother. There was ten seconds of Radio 4 between the static, just enough for Ace to learn that there'd been twelve casualties following a car bomb in Basra. She switched it off savagely.

The Doctor turned to her slowly. 'We could still listen to *The Archers*,' he said, searching her face for a clue.

'It pisses me off,' Ace snapped, scowling. 'Twelve casualties, just like that. Who were they? Old? Young? Women? Men?' She paused, glanced at the handbrake. 'Kids? Were they married? If they were, were they happy? What kind of people were they? How would they have wanted to die? We just hear "twelve casualties", but they're not. They're twelve people, their lives just ended before their time in fire, in fear and in noise, and all anyone will ever know about them is that they're dead. Not even their names.'

The Doctor shuffled in his seat. 'I know one name,' he said quietly. 'Mr Nussrat Mahmood. He bought me a coffee after I fell out of the sky in 1994. He had an extraordinary design for self-cleaning fabric. We chatted long into the night, and I smiled and laughed and played with his children, knowing already how he'd die.'

Ace was dumbstruck for a long moment. When she spoke, the bitterness was gone, her voice was almost apologetic. 'It seems sometimes no one cares.'

'We care, Ace.'

'I know.'

The Doctor studied her face even more closely. 'My goodness, are you crying?'

Ace sniffed and shook her head proudly. 'Nah.'

'Fine,' said the Doctor. 'Neither am I... by the way.'

The aurora of the Great Kingdom's fury bathed the friends' faces in blue light and proclaimed them both liars as they drove into the long night.

∞

Ace snapped her eyes open in alarm. She was being shaken and jolted around on the back seat of the Audi.

Sitting up quickly, she discarded the blanket the Doctor must have draped over her, to see her friend hunched over the steering wheel, the carcass of a Danish pastry gripped tightly in one hand.

She scrambled through the narrow gap between driver's and passenger's seat, ignoring the Doctor's vague grunts of protest. There was a cardboard cup of coffee that looked as though it had come from the University tar pit waiting for her on the dashboard, and she grabbed it gratefully. Then looked out of the window in suspicion. They were still on an unmade road, and she could see what looked a lot like little people with wings tending the crops to either side of the road.

'Where did you get breakfast?' she asked.

The Doctor had the decency to look embarrassed. 'We hit a stretch of undistorted space time and came out by Warwick Services. I'd have let you stretch your legs, but the impudent wretch at the petrol station started asking me for money for the breakfast and fuel. I tried to tell him I was saving his precious objective reality but he just wouldn't listen. I'm afraid I had to thump him.'

Ace closed her eyes slowly, relishing the blackness within. So they were stuck between demons in one world and the fuzz in the other? Great.

'Look,' she said bluntly. 'When we fix this thing, you will change back, right?'

'Yes,' the Doctor said simply. His face was completely blank as he continued. 'Everything will be... as it was.'

Ace guessed what was tormenting him. 'But you're still the Doctor,' she said. 'You look different, you talk a bit funny, but you're the same bloke.'

The Doctor tried not to sneer. 'Identity is so important to humans. You talk about individuality, strength of character, personality, bearing up, but it's all illusion. Five years ago you were barely adolescent. You were a completely different person, Dorothy.'

Ace's eyes flashed. 'Never call me – oh, yeah... right.'

The Doctor nodded. 'You're not the same person you were five years ago. No one is. And it's never a comfortable fact.

'I'm a Lord of Time, a reject from a stagnant race. Change appals us, and yet it's wired into our biology in such a drastic fashion. It's only natural to cling to each to of my bodies and to mourn their passing.'

Ace bit her lip. 'I guess.'

A faintly awkward silence descended, broken abruptly by a thump on the roof.

Ace swore, ducking instinctively in her seat. An aurik's claws scrabbled down over the windscreen and the Doctor swerved to the left, trying to shake the thing off.

She swore again as she saw flashes of blue glinting from the blood-red tree they were passing under.

With a soft pattering noise, the waiting cybrids landed on the roof and dug their claws in. One of them landed with a crash on the rear windscreen, cracking it in a spider web of fractured safety glass before rolling off. There was a pause, and then an inch long golden talon plunged through the corner of the roof and started to slice the light metal like a sardine tin.

The Doctor was wrestling with the wheel, but the creatures were sticking firmly in their handholds, and Ace could hear pounding and tearing up above.

Suddenly Ace felt a draught above her head, and looked up to see the first aurik had carved a small hole. She ducked as its powerful arm swiped into the car. As she dodged, she noticed the river running alongside the road on the left hand side. 'We're gonna have to ditch the car, Doctor. Try and swim for it!'

She'd already unfastened her seatbelt and was reaching for the door handle when she felt the Doctor's hand on her shoulder. 'No, Ace. There's another way.'

'What do you mean?' Ace yelled, ducking to avoid the claws that slashed even lower at her. 'What are you waiting for?'

The Doctor's face was reddening. 'The last *possible* moment. Every act has consequences, you know that.'

The questing talons swept lower still, snagging Ace's hair. The Doctor changed gear, then swiped at the aurik with the same arm. He was accelerating, and Ace was glad she'd slumped so low she couldn't see the road ahead.

'Professor!' she yelled, seeing a cybrid had lifted away the wreckage of the rear windscreen and was lowering its foul head to enter the car.

'Call me Doctor,' he replied, his jaw set. 'It might be your last chance.'

He closed his eyes, and ice-bright light flooded the car for a moment. Ace felt a soft bump under the front wheel beneath her knee.

He opened his eyes, looked down at his hideous jacket, and smiled softly.

Ace thought it was the happiest she'd ever seen him, in any body. Hesitantly, she hoisted herself back into her seat.

They were driving through tranquil sunlit fields. Birdsong filtered sweetly through the gaping holes in the windows and roof, and the charred corpse of a cybrid smoked gently on the bonnet.

'I'm free,' the Doctor told her with a wink. 'I didn't change.'

'You mean my Doctor isn't coming back?'

'Oh, that scamp's the least of my worries,' the Doctor boomed genially. 'I'm sure he'll be along sooner or later, he's part of history. The past. Hah! But the future, Ace, the future!'

'What about it?'

'My future hasn't been written yet. No one's has!'

Ace squinted in the sunlight. 'Yeah, that's great. Um? What was all that about consequences then?'

The Doctor leaned back in the driver's seat and whistled the riff to *Shiny Happy People*. 'Oh, that was two minutes ago,' he said airily. 'Now I remember that the future's never set in stone and free will's not an illusion after all. I mean, now we're driving in a straight line, but I could send us off to the right... to the left... '

He punctuated his final words with nudges of the steering wheel, and Ace clutched his sleeve. 'Come off it. You can move from side to side, but you've still got to follow the road ahead.'

'Oh, you think so? Then watch... this!' He wrenched the wheel to the left in a grandiose gesture.

The car swerved gracefully across the road, smashed daintily through a flimsy fence and plunged headlong into the river, launching a huge wave from the bumper that spread across the placid waters, seriously unbalancing several mean-looking ducklings.

Ace hauled herself out through the wrecked roof, swearing her head off. Her mood wasn't helped by the Doctor's merry laughter. He opened the driver's door and stood in the knee-deep water, smirking at his friend perched on the car's roof. 'Oh, Ace, don't sulk! Those auriks will have recorded this car, and a walk'll do us good.'

Soon, they were strolling across the fields hand in hand, sneezing occasionally from the rape seed pollen and roils of greasy cybrid smoke that drifted across the plain.

∞

After walking for a couple of hours, they reached a cybrid settlement. Ace's hand had stiffened in the Doctor's grasp, but he'd just smiled. 'It's all right, Ace. They may be force-mutated demons, but they're still just people. We'll be fine if we watch our manners.'

They'd headed for the largest of the turquoise pyramids that comprised the settlement. Dozens of the azure forms scuttled around the gloomy interior, carrying plates awkwardly between their talons. The Doctor had left Ace on a rough wooden stool while he disappeared to... the bar?

A lone cybrid scuttled up and perched on the table's other stool. Ace thought about telling it the place was taken, but she'd seen that line start a dozen pub brawls in her

own world, who knew what would happen here?

'Elevated human, I see,' the cybrid drooled appreciatively. 'A bit of a rarity since the Wall of Tears fell. You're not with that bloke, are you? The thaumaturgs want him.'

He seemed casual enough, but Ace reached slowly down to the reassuring bulk of rucksack. 'They'll have to go through me first, mate,' she told him firmly.

The creature laughed, folding its long arms behind its carapace so its gold and silver tattoos warped and twisted over its wiry musculature. 'Yeah, you look a bit handy. But relax, this is renegade territory. No geeky thaumy calls the shots here.'

'Ah, the thaumaturgs. I was wondering where they'd got to.' The Doctor was standing behind her, carrying three pint mugs with the assurance of a true barfly. He put one down in front of the cybrid with a hopeful smile. 'I'd love to know what they've been up to.'

The cybrid squinted up at the Time Lord. 'If you can get a dash of lime in that bad boy,' he said, indicating the pint, 'then I'd love to tell you.'

Ace hadn't eaten all day, so by the time the Doctor returned from the bar again, she was half drunk and halfway through her pottery pigs anecdote.

Perhaps anxious to change the subject, the cybrid took a quick gulp from his pint before turning to the Doctor and telling him everything. 'It started three years ago, really. With the Archimage, Technomancer and Heirophant all gone, there was a fair bit of panic. Most of us went a bit mental to be honest, as you've probably noticed. Then the thaumies sort of ganged up, said they were wise and our natural leaders and seized control from their base in the Grand Archive.'

Ace couldn't help boggling. 'And you let them?'

The cybrid gargled a mouthful of beer, considering its reply. 'No skin off my nose,' it eventually said with a shrug. 'We *are* renegades. I think we even sent 'em a special hat.'

The Doctor was engrossed. 'Of course. The Great Kingdom had its own history as well as inhabitants. The three peoples I originally encountered were bound to have developed, especially with so much mental energy sloshing about.' Then he frowned. 'But why are the only thaumaturgs in London?'

The cybrid finished its drink and leaned back even further on its stool. 'No idea, mate. There's been no thaumy born to the Great Kingdom anywhere since the Wall of Tears fell.'

'As I recall,' the Doctor said, his eyes twinkling. 'The Wall's collapse was supposed to herald a flood of barbarians.'

'Yeah, that's us. Us and the big aurik camp at the White Cliffs. "Lo, and we marched unto the very foot of the Ziggurat, whereupon one brave cybrid spake 'Brothers! Let us turn about and fix our gaze on home. For this corner of our world – yea though here

the Gods do walk abroad – it is basically *not all that*, really.'" Now hush up, the stripper's coming on.'

Sure enough, a petite cybrid had taken to the stage. The Doctor and Ace watched with horror as she launched into her routine, and they would argue for years to come over whose jaw dropped further. The Doctor pushed a pile of odd bronze coins over the table to Ace. 'You get them in, Ace, I want to see if she gets her chitin off.'

∞

Ace awoke on a park bench in Regent's Park, and instantly regretted it. The quantum whatevers had affected her after all, if she'd thought she could drink demon beer safely all night. She just about remembered the Doctor carrying her out of there, had an odd memory of him bargaining with two auriks to fly them to the thaumaturgs' Grand Archive. It was the kind of thing the Doctor would at least hesitate to do when sober, and she'd decided she was never letting him drink again. Thankfully, she'd blacked out about a minute into the flight.

At least the sun was going down, even the dusk made her eyes prickle with soreness. Even the distant traffic noise was irritating her. Through her private world of misery, she slowly realised the Doctor was speaking to her. Sitting on the end of the bench with his head in his hands.

'It's me, Ace. I'm the problem. That's why you didn't change. I protected you without even realising. I've become the nexus point between two conflicting universes. The only way to end this is at the cost of my life.'

She was still barely conscious, but his meaning chilled her bones. 'Professor?'

The Doctor stood up, clutching something bulky in one hand. 'Call me Doctor,' he said, almost inaudibly. 'And it's too late.'

Shouldering Ace's rucksack, he left without looking back.

∞

On a hotel rooftop that had become a golden mosaic, the Doctor's breath billowed out into the chill night air. As he opened Ace's rucksack, he caught a glimpse of his reflection in a freezing puddle, his face smeared in Necros-blue paint. 'You don't have to do this,' the reflection said. 'There's another way.'

Shaking his head, the Doctor began to tie a dozen cans of Nitro-9 around his head.

'Death comes to us all,' he boomed cheerily. 'I always try to make it *for* something

important: saving a world, a universe, a friend. But in the end I'm still broken, cowering, slumped lying on hard ground as death takes me.

'Not this time!' the Doctor roared, his voice only slightly muffled by the canisters. 'I'll save this world, save Ace, and I'll face death standing!' He activated the simple timer on one of the cans and heard a final click.

'Yes, but all you actually have to do is – ' his reflection began.

'What?' the Doctor yelled, realisation hitting him. 'Of course, how could I be so stupid?' He scrabbled frantically at the explosives.

There was an ear-splitting explosion and the whole building shook.

∞

Ace's head whipped round as she heard the blast. She'd been searching the streets for him with no luck. Her face paled. 'Professor,' she whispered. 'Doctor. What have you done?'

∞

Sabalom Glitz was enjoying the last of an evening's drinking in Warwick Student Union, where he was lecturing in Sports Science between jobs, when he looked into the bottom of his pint glass and had a strange thought.

'You know, Dibber,' he said, turning to his partner in crime. 'In my own curious fashion, I think I've always loved you.'

'Thank you very much, Mr Glitz,' mumbled Dibber indistinctly, as he continued to grapple with a short-skirted little primary school teacher. 'Does that mean we can hire someone *else* to clean out the waste recyclers?'

'I fear you've made yourself a mite indispensable in that area, old son. Just bask in your elevated status as a true and trusted friend.' Dibber looked less than impressed, but then the trainee teacher distracted him impressively.

The barman was even less impressed. 'I told you two to drink up and clear off!'

Glitz looked hurt. 'But we have heard the chimes at midnight, me old mucker!'

'Yes, half an hour ago. So up anchor and piss off, Captain bloody Jack Sparrow!'

Glitz sighed, almost daintily knocking off the bottom of a bottle of Bud against the bar. 'I think what we need, Dibber,' he said as he waved jagged glass at the barman's throat, 'is a ship's cat.'

∞

Ace burst out on to the wrecked roof, stumbling over rubble. She saw a bundle of tattered cloth twitching in the breeze, and dashed over to it.

∞

Deep inside the Grand Archive, in a chamber lined by marble bookshelves, the thaumaturg leader cocked his head, careful not to dislodge the Hat of Indifference, the cybrid gift acknowledging thaumaturg supremacy over the peoples of the Great Kingdom. 'So much for the Dark One,' it hissed. 'He has passed into shadow and now is the time of our becoming.'

A crowd of gaunt grey figures twittered and hissed excitedly, their pale eyes bulging with excitement.

∞

The coat was blood-stained, but empty. Ace smiled through her tears and stared out desperately into the night.

A shape unfolded against the brightest stars.

'Never mind the Sidney Carton heroics,' said the Doctor, flicking his hat up his arm and on to his head, 'This party's over.'

Ace had no words straight away. She embraced her friend roughly, breathing in the faint scent of his brown jacket and weeping with joy. Then she could speak. 'But what are we going to *do?*'

The Doctor smiled, ever so slightly, and looked at his fingers. 'Don't worry, if I can shoot rabbits, then I can shoot auriks.'

∞

The thaumaturgs turned as one as the doors flew open. In strode a little man with a face that spoke of the darkest magick. 'Libraries give us power,' he snarled.

Those nearest to the Time Lord hissed and snarled, but for some reason they weren't quite able to leap on him and tear him to pieces for his heresy.

'You remembered the Great Kingdom, even after Saraquazel restored you. You focused all your energies into restoring this place, into changing back. Why?' The Doctor's voice was low, brooking no denial. 'You deliberately perverted the fabric of space and time, knowing it would twist your physical forms. Again, why?'

The leader stepped forward on the chamber's central dais. 'We are the students.'

A second thaumaturg jumped up beside it. 'We are the graduates stuck in dead-end jobs.'

A third. 'We are the unemployed dreamers.'

The leader stepped up to face the Doctor's blazing eyes. 'We are the ones who *dream* of your existence, Time Lord. We dream of exploration, because our lives are all mapped out. Who would not trade that for a fantasy, where our books have power? Where the capitalists and bullies are nothing but shambling cannon fodder and we alone can rule?'

The Doctor felt Ace's chin on his shoulder, drew strength from her faith in him as she spoke quietly. 'It was the one. It was the only dream.'

The Doctor scowled. 'You're all pathetic.'

There was a sudden silence, followed quickly by a ripple of anger from the twenty or so thaumaturgs. 'We followed you,' they screeched. 'We shared your calling. To fight for wisdom, to rise above the common self-centred herd.'

Ace stepped forward, her face scarlet. 'You wanted to be the Doctor?' she yelled at them, 'By twisting and changing and *sulking?* That's not what we're about. The Doctor and I travel, you just want to change the universe so you never even need to leave your own stinking bedsits!'

The lead thaumaturg spat on the floor and leaped at Ace with murder in its eyes. It exploded in a silent ball of white light, no time even to scream.

The others shrank back as they saw the Doctor's smoking finger outstretched towards the creature's remains. 'The Dark One,' they hissed. 'The Dark One has returned.'

'There is no Dark One,' the Doctor scoffed, swinging his index finger in a wide arc and smiling quietly as the creatures ducked. 'Although that death was unnecessary,' he admitted, 'as this ends tonight.'

There was a shriek of derision from the thaumaturgs, who bunched around the Time Lord hesitantly but inexorably. Ace found herself back to back with her friend in a rapidly-shrinking patch of floor, surrounded by a ring of the enraged creatures.

'What will you do, Dark One? How will you save this world when you cannot even save your friend?' Three auriks were soaring down from the ceiling of the chamber, gleaming claws reaching for her greedily.

They slowed their dive as Ace fixed them with a hard stare, an outstretched finger and a cold voice.

'Bippity, boppity, boo, motherfucker.'

There was a flash and the auriks dropped to the floor like bricks. Ace smirked, but caught the Doctor's glare.

'Oh, come *on*,' she protested, 'Like I was gonna waste a line like that! How about you pulling your finger out and saving the world a bit?'

She was unsurprised at the Doctor's reply. 'It's done,' he said, a twinkle in his eye.

There was a little white pop at the centre of Ace's mind.

∞

Ace looked around and saw a dimly-lit room full of desktop PCs. Incongruously, newspapers were pinned to the walls, labelled like gallery exhibits.

She and the Doctor were at the centre of a ring of prone humans. Ace counted three *Appetite for Destruction* t-shirts and silently vowed never to be That Guy again.

The Doctor was standing with his hands tucked behind his back, looking terribly smug. 'What happened on the roof,' he explained. 'I was the cause of disruption all along, you see, bringing the TARDIS to a nexus point with a huge payload of artron energy, just as those silly people were focusing their hardest. Once I shorted out that payload, everything snapped straight back. The Great Kingdom. Ripples through time, like I said. But rippling backward, not forward.'

Ace was only half-listening. She was busy trying to set fire to things with her fingers, and getting pissed off that it wasn't working. But she caught his tone. 'I don't know why you're so smug, you did have to blow your own head off!'

There was a pause, and the Doctor removed his hat sombrely. 'That was his idea. Excessive... Not to mention uncomfortable. Really, all we needed to do was dematerialise the TARDIS.'

'Just leave?'

He nodded. 'Just, for once, leave. Speaking of which...' he gestured towards the exit.

Ace looked at the pile of former thaumaturgs. 'Will they be all right?'

'The odd nightmare, lingering misplaced sentiments of intellectual superiority. Want to check?' he asked blithely.

'Nah, let's move on somewhere. Kick some arse.'

The Doctor laughed. 'Oh, Ace. I've taken you to the Renaissance, I've shown you Athenian civilisation. Let's see how you like the Age of the Rump.'

Laughing, they left the British Library.

Room With No Doors – A Cutaway

Kate Orman

Here we have a missing scene from Kate Orman's New Adventure The Room With No Doors*, which fills in some blanks on the relationship between companion Chris Cwej and recurring supporting character Joel Mintz.*

For those of a nervous disposition, it involves sex.

Joel makes sure that Chris spoons him, because if it was the other way around, his hard-on would become pretty obvious.

They're curled together for warmth, the tall, muscular blond and the skinny redheaded teen. It's fifteen sixty in Japan, just barely spring, and the air's like cold water. Hot sake helped them get to sleep. Then Chris shouted them both awake from a drunken dream. Joel had insisting on giving him a backrub until the Adjudicator drifted back into snoring like a motorbike.

Chris is so handsome it's almost ridiculous, thinks Joel. Whatever happened to the boy next door – the sun-tanned, crew-cut all-American male? Except for the part where Chris's yellow hair hangs down below his shoulders now. Joel had to push it out of the way for the massage, couldn't help combing his fingers through it as Chris relaxed beneath him. Oh *God, he thinks, tucking his hands under his armpits, aaargh, God help me, I wonder how much I could get away with without waking him up.*

What's it like to be a man where, when Chris comes from? It's not the sort of thing the Admiral ever talked about… are they complete conservatives like in Star Trek*, where all the gays were maybe killed off in the Eugenics Wars? Or is everyone a total slut like in* Brave New World*? Please let them be sluts,* thinks Joel. *Oh yeah. Chris Cwej, very pneumatic. Whatever that means.*

Chris shifts in his sleep. Joel freezes, then unfreezes long enough to whip his hand out of his pants, then freezes again. Chris mumbles. His fingers slide down Joel's belly in a smooth, slow motion, hesitating only for a moment at the open button of Joel's jeans, before slipping inside and firmly taking hold of the situation.

'Oh my God,' squeaks Joel.

'Hee hee hee,' says Chris.

Behold the Martian

Matthew Griffiths

Craig Hinton wrote big stories. Even at their smallest, his adventures deal with the fate of entire worlds and civilisations. But in all of them, the characters, be they human, Ice Warrior or Gallifreyan, are always affected by issues at a very personal level, struggling with their jobs, their faiths, their relationships. Without the scope or Whoniverse-encompassing virtuosity to pull off one of his epics, I still wanted to write a story that investigated the ideas he raises about history, religion and love in a smaller, more intimate context – but one where the consequences would be no less important.

So it made sense to write around a story that we all know. It's a story that is given its own spin in The Crystal Bucephalus*, where a man at the heart of a grand space opera poses as a version of Lazarus that he has invented. From there, I took the tale back to its roots, the man himself, deep in Earth's past. Taking my cue from Craig's fascination for all things Martian, I could only really choose a TARDIS crew that included Ssard, to give me the chance to explore the history through an Ice Warrior's visor. Then, when researching Stacy's background, I found her own faith tucked away in the mythos, with the contrasts and conflicts that this would allow me to draw out. Teamed with a Doctor who from the first is mistaken for Jesus himself, the potential seemed clear. I hope it proves just how durable all our stories can be.*

He looked up at the stars and knew he was lost.

He had trusted himself to the ship, the relic, and started his journey... how long ago was it? He had lost himself in time as well as space. The currents had washed by, around him, over him, swept away everything that made any sense, and he had found himself here. It was a land that seemed blind to him, but where an act of faith such as his could seem terrifying. The one certainty he had clung to, the very reason why he had come here, had proved to be wrong. He lay on the rocks and asked the shimmering stars, where is my saviour?

Then the rain began.

∞

'This is your brother?' asked the long-haired man. Marta nodded. He removed his strange, rain-sodden cloak, shook it and passed it to her, then knelt by the bedside.

'And how long has he been like this – Marta, wasn't it? Pretty name.' The man did not look up, but continued to examine the figure on the bed.

'About a day, sir, and now the rain brings a chill.'

'It'll pass,' the man muttered. He laid his hand on her brother's forehead.

'He shouldn't be like this, you know, not here, not now.'

'What ails him, sir?' Marta asked hesitantly.

'He's been attacked. Injured.'

'I can't see any wound,' she said. 'What attacked him?'

'Something that shouldn't have done.'

'And can you help him?'

'I'll do my best, Marta. You were lucky I was passing; I've dealt with this kind of thing before.'

Marta nodded cautiously. 'Word was that you were several days away,' she said. 'My sister has even gone to find you.'

For a moment, the man did not speak, absorbed in his examinations. Then, without looking up, he said: 'Word? What word?' His voice was half a chuckle and half a snort, she thought.

'You are the one they talk so much about?' she asked.

'That depends on what they're saying.' The man reached into a pocket in his sleeveless jerkin and produced two small white objects, like tiny pebbles. 'Would you mind fetching me some water?'

She did not move. After a moment, the man seemed to realise that she was peering at the contents of his hand. 'Oh *these?* Herbal preparations. They should ease your brother's pain.'

Marta nodded. She went to the other room and poured water from a pitcher into a cup. She returned to the bedroom and handed it to the man. He was about to help her brother drink when he stopped suddenly and turned to her again.

'Marta, have you seen anything odd recently? Out of the ordinary?'

'We live in strange times, sir.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'We live in an age of signs and wonders, sir.' Was he testing her?

'Any recent signs or wonders, though?'

She looked at him quizzically. 'Two days ago,' she said, 'on a clear morning, a cloud appeared from nowhere and covered the sun.'

'That's exactly the sort of sign I'd expect. Thank you.'

He lifted Marta's brother into a sitting position, raising the cup to his lips to let him drink. Then, putting the cup to one side, he slipped his medicines into his patient's mouth one at a time.

Marta watched her brother swallow, his face creasing in pain.

'There,' said the man. 'That should help.'

'Will he recover, sir?'

The man stood, but avoided her gaze. 'I have to leave, I'm afraid. Tell me, which way was this – cloud heading?'

'East, sir.'

The long-haired man nodded. He was halfway into his cloak before Marta touched a hand to his elbow. He stopped, and she asked: 'Is it true? Are you who they say you are?'

'Who do they say I am?' He frowned at her. In front of the window, his face was framed by the wet light.

'My Lord?'

'Ah,' said the man. 'Oh no. Not again.'

∞

Stacy sighed and wiped a wet strand of hair from her eyes.

'It would help if we knew what we were looking for.'

'Something that doesn't belong in this time, I would imagine,' Ssard hissed. He looked down the road ahead of them, as if it would be obvious. But all he could see was the dusty track, which was becoming muddy in the rain, and the groves of olive trees that lined its edges here and there. There weren't even any humans around, so the cloak felt like an unnecessary encumbrance. He was getting pretty hot.

'The Doctor needn't have been so cagey, though,' Stacy grumbled, kicking a pebble off the path. 'I mean, he was off before he even told us where on Earth we are. Or when.'

'Somewhere warm,' hissed Ssard.

'Ah, the famous Martian sense of humour,' Stacy smiled at him. 'Good of the Doctor to cool things down a little.'

Ssard looked into the rain and grunted. 'That's why we haven't seen anyone. Your species is not too fond of precipitation.'

'Oh, we love it!' she said, and elbowed his chest plate.

'The irony is not lost on me,' he muttered.

'It's irony makes your planet so red,' Stacy smiled.

They trudged on in this humour until they came to a fork in the road. To the left, the path wound up into the hills, but to the right, it led down into a large settlement, a human city.

Stacy stopped suddenly and took a step back.

'What's the matter?' Ssard hissed.

She took his arm. 'I just had the strangest feeling. I think I know that place.'

'You've been here before?'

'I'm not sure. I don't think so. It's like... déjà vu, only it isn't.' She frowned. 'Not just to look at, I mean. I can feel it deeper than that.'

This was odd, thought Ssard. In the time he'd known her, he had never seen her quite so affected. He looked at her in puzzled concern, and then placed a hand on her shoulder. 'You could go back to the TARDIS.'

'And who's going to watch your back then, big guy?' But her tone wasn't entirely as confident as her words. 'Besides, the Doctor didn't seem to think it was the safest place to be while that other craft is doing whatever it's doing to the timelines.' She squinted down the road. 'Plus I think I know how we can find out where we are. We can ask her.' She pointed to where a woman, pulling a cloak tightly around her as if to keep off the worst of the rain, was heading towards them up the road.

∞

The Doctor straightened his coat and made for the door, but Marta was in his way.

'What about my brother?'

It was a good question, thought the Doctor. Disruptor wounds were usually fatal, but this man's injuries were odd, as though his body were still deciding what damage had been done. That made it all the more important to find the assailant and his vessel.

'You must let him rest.'

'Will he recover?'

The Doctor looked back at the figure on the bed.

'Marta, I'm sorry but I really don't know.' He watched her head droop. 'I can try my best for him, find the... person who did this.'

'But they say you have powers, sir. Can you – can you – ?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'Marta, I can't! I'm not who you think I am.'

'They also say you deny your identity.' Her voice was nearly a whisper.

The Doctor closed his eyes. 'I'm sorry. I have to leave. I don't know why your brother was attacked but I can't let this happen to anybody else.'

'You aren't the man my sister told me about.'

'No, I've told you, I – wait, how, how would your sister know me?'

'She met –'

'– the man you thought I was, yes, yes, yes, I see, I see.' Something dawned on him. 'Your sister, what's her name?'

'Maryam, sir.'

'Maryam, Marta and... ' the Doctor looked back towards his patient, his eyebrow raised – ' ... Lazarus.'

∞

As the woman got closer, it was clear that she was upset. Stacy slowed to greet her, trying not to seem too urgent. But at the same time she was itching to know where the Doctor had brought them, and why he wouldn't tell them when it was.

'Hello,' she said. 'I'm – can I help?' The woman said nothing. 'It's okay,' Stacy continued. She shot a glance back up the road to where Ssard was lagging behind. 'I'm Stacy. Me and my friend were just making for the city and wondered what brought you out on a day like this.' Then again, she didn't seem to be bothered about the weather.

'I'm sorry, but I must get home.' The woman tried to move by her, almost pushing past, but she slipped in the mud and stumbled.

Stacy took her arm to steady her. 'Are you all right?'

The woman turned and Stacy saw her eyes were red with weeping, deep with sadness.

'He will not come.'

Stacy shivered. 'Who?'

There was a moment's silence.

'I went to Yerûshalayim to find help for my brother. He is ill.'

'Jerusalem..?' It was as much as Stacy could manage to get out. All the pieces connected in her head before she could stop them, and she instantly remembered the story. It was one of the many she had learnt as a child that had never left her: the dying man, whose sister went to Jerusalem to find help from a healer she knew of old. But that healer had not come, at least not until three days later, and now the TARDIS and another time vessel had arrived. In the city below her was – she shut her eyes. An arm reached out to steady her, now. She had not even heard Ssard approach.

'What is it?' he hissed, leaning in towards her.

'It's –' She looked up at him. 'I know where we are. I know why the Doctor was so funny. He knew I – and he couldn't say anything.' She turned to the woman, now desperate to ask questions she knew she didn't want the answers to. But the woman was staring up at Ssard. The cowl of his cloak had slipped back, exposing his visor and scaly mouth. 'Please,' Stacy said hastily, 'Don't worry. He's a friend. Now –'

The woman shook his head. 'It can't be. It was him. He attacked my brother.'

∞

'I wish you had been him,' Marta said. 'You seem so like the man Maryam described. You...' But the right words would not come. Why was she angry with him, though? It wasn't his fault she had seen him, asked for his help. She'd just assumed – hoped that he was someone else.

After pacing for several intense moments, the man was kneeling at the bedside again, his ear to her brother's chest.

Marta coughed. 'Sir? Who are you, if...?'

'Hmm? Oh, I'm a doctor.'

Hope rose again in Marta. 'Then you can still help him?'

'Perhaps. But Eigen states like this can get very tricky.'

'Sir?'

'He's on the brink. Between two possible worlds.'

'You don't need to talk so strangely. I have seen people sicken and die.'

'Not like this, though. It's as if he's both sick and well at the same time.'

'If he... if he dies he will pass into the world beyond this one. The life eternal.'

The man considered this. 'Well, his name will be remembered for the rest of time.' His eyes widened and he slapped his forehead. 'Yes, yes, yes! That's it! Remembered for the rest of time – and then misused. Taken in vain, you might say.'

'Sir?'

'I need to go, Marta.' He laid his hands on her shoulders. 'Thank you.' He dashed towards the stairs.

'But was I wrong, sir? After all? You can save him, can't you?'

He looked at her, his eyes blue and sharp and clear.

'Have faith, Marta. Have faith.'

∞

'That is impossible,' hissed Ssard.

Stacy looked between him and the woman. 'What happened? Please, tell me what you saw.'

'It was in the night,' the woman replied. She narrowed her eyes at Ssard. 'He passed through the house as I slept, heading for my brother's room. And then... '

'Yes?'

'The air flickered, as though it were a candle flame, and he was gone.' She sighed. 'I thought it was a dream until I saw him again now.'

'Not a dream,' said Ssard. 'But it does not sound like the technology of our people.'

'And who are your people?' the woman snapped.

'I am... ' he hesitated.

'An acolyte of Mars,' Stacy interjected. 'You must have seen another of his kind.' The woman looked at her sceptically, but said nothing.

'You must believe us,' Ssard continued. 'It is against my creed to harm another.'

'You follow a war god and expect me to believe you?' shrieked the woman. She hurried up the road away from them, but after a few metres she stopped and fell to her knees on the muddy ground.

Ssard could see she was sobbing and made to move towards her, but Stacy put out a hand. 'Give her a minute. She's had a shock.' She gave him a pointed look. 'She's not the only one either.'

'I'm sorry. Where are we, then?' he asked.

Stacy sighed. 'In all the time I've travelled with the Doctor, I must have tried not to think about this place. But it's always been with me. Perhaps I knew we shouldn't come here and find out.' Her eyes glazed over. 'Like I couldn't go back to the Dreadnought either.'

Ssard let her reflect for a moment, then asked gently: 'Find out what?'

'I'm sorry.' She touched his elbow. 'Listen, would you ever think of asking the Doctor to take you back to old Mars?'

Ssard inclined his head. 'I don't follow.'

'I mean, so you could meet... Hang on, you said your creed, what do you mean?'

Ssard straightened up. 'I'm a lay follower of Oras. He teaches us the sanctity of all life.'

'Doesn't sound very Martian to me.'

Ssard pointed up the road. 'Is that what she meant? The humans follow a war god called Mars?'

Stacy didn't answer at first. The she muttered, 'Not all of us, no.'

There was a long pause, then Ssard realised what she was getting at.

'Your god. He's here, isn't he?'

Stacy nodded. 'I think in that town,' she muttered. 'But I don't want to meet him. We can't risk interfering.' She stared at the figure ahead of them, the woman struggling to her feet again. 'And more to the point, we've got to find the Doctor and make sure he doesn't interfere either.' She gestured ahead of them. 'We ought to walk her back. If she's who I think she is –'

'Yes?'

'It doesn't matter. We see that she gets home, find the Doctor and the TARDIS and go. Come on.'

∞

The Doctor tugged off his coat and threw it onto the hat stand to dry as he hurried down to the console. He started flicking switches, calling up readings, to confirm the status of the timelines. He was well beyond the Blinovitch horizon now. Ordinarily, any alterations that had been made since the TARDIS and the other craft had arrived would have become part of history, but given Lazarus's fluctuating Eigen state, the Doctor suspected there was still a chance to act.

Wait. That was odd. He double-checked one of the readings and pulled the monitor screen down on its chain. From among the web of timelines that fractured the picture, he picked two strands and traced them with his fingers, then made some rapid entries on the console. Although it was fringed with flickering filaments, the line that stemmed from the point when the TARDIS had arrived was strong and well-defined, suggesting that history had taken a clear route after all. He frowned, and mapped this line over the first, the original timeline. They were identical, running straight out of the moment he, Stacy and Ssard had stepped from the Ship. Another point winked into life at the end of the line. The other time vessel, thought the Doctor.

He placed his hands on the wooden shelf around the console and let his shoulders sag. If events were playing out as they always had done, why was the assailant's ship still here? There was only one way to find out.

He pushed the monitor out of his way and moved round to the co-ordinate settings. It would still be chancy to move the TARDIS with the interference from the other vehicle, but if he disconnected the temporal vector settings, he could ride it through subspace, skimming the surface of the vortex rather than actually travelling through time. He would arrive at the other vessel in no time – well, in some time, actually, but it would be speedier than by foot. He flicked the final switch and the gears of the time rotor rose and fell, pulsing with their eerie blue light. The Doctor crossed his fingers and hoped he knew what he was doing.

∞

The two strangers followed Maryam up the road towards Bethany until they reached the main junction, where they stopped as though looking for something and had a muttered exchange. What were they waiting for? She scarcely cared, turning up the road and trudging

on. They were so absorbed in their argument that they didn't even notice her go. She was beginning to feel that the rain had soaked through into her soul and was weighing it down as much it did her cloak and dress.

When she eventually reached the house, she hurried up the stairs, hanging her cloak in the anteroom. Then she stepped through into her brother's room. Marta was kneeling at the bedside, holding his hand.

Maryam leant over and touched her brother's face.

'He seems... better?'

'A stranger was here. A doctor. He gave him medicines.'

Maryam nodded. Then she sank to her knees, wrapping her arms around her sister and starting to sob again. 'He will not come. He will not come.' Marta held her sister close, rubbing her hand up and down her back.

'Don't worry,' Marta murmured. 'Don't worry. He will be well again.'

'How? Who was this doctor?'

'He's trying to save Lazarus.'

Suddenly, there was a noise in the anteroom. The curtain swept aside and the two strangers, Stacy and her... creature came in.

Maryam stood. 'What are you doing here?'

'Please,' Marta added. 'You must leave. Our brother is unwell and needs rest.'

Stacy pointedly ignored the figure on the bed and addressed Marta. 'We − have there been any strangers here?' She looked at Maryam. 'I mean, apart from your visitor.'

Marta frowned. 'There was a doctor passing through the town. I brought him here to examine our brother. He asked about signs.'

'Oh my God,' said Stacy. 'Ssard, we're too late.'

'Who are they?' Marta asked Maryam. 'What visitor?'

Before Maryam could answer, Stacy grabbed Marta by the shoulders. 'You've got to tell me what's been happening. The Doctor was here?'

'Yes,' said Marta. 'He had medicines. He's going to save Laz− '

'Don't say his name, please don't say his name. I don't want to believe it.'

Maryam took the woman's wrist. 'Then leave. Go now.'

'Where did he go? The Doctor?' the creature hissed.

'East,' said Marta, 'He went east. He went looking for his sign.'

'Back towards Yerûshalayim,' said the woman. 'He must have found out where the craft landed and taken the TARDIS.' She turned to leave, then stopped. 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean... Your brother will be well again, soon. I promise.'

'Your doctor will save him?' Maryam asked, not yet daring to hope what her sister seemed to believe already.

'I hope not,' Stacy said. 'But I'm very much afraid he will.'

The curtain flapped in the breeze as they left. Maryam listened to them go down the stairs, into the street. But after a few minutes, all she could hear was the pitter-patter of the rain on the street outside.

∞

The Doctor stepped from the TARDIS into a hollow on the hillside. Opposite him was the spot where the fat, ridged saucer of the other craft had crash-landed. And that was odd, he thought. It had crashed, so why hadn't it made more of an impact than this? Marta had talked of signs, but the only one she had mentioned was the craft passing overhead. The Doctor frowned. Tugging his collar upright, he traversed the wet, rocky ground, skirting the ship until he found an airlock. He produced the sonic screwdriver from his pocket and let himself in.

The cabin sloped at a precarious angle, and he had to lean against a console to get his balance. At first glance, it seemed to have sustained a great deal of damage as it landed, but he soon realised that it must have been built that way. The lights flickered on and off, throwing occasional illumination on its dark design. It seemed to be a shuntspace vessel, thought the Doctor, placing it around the 11th or 12th millennium, and it had been retrofitted to travel through the vortex. Retrofitted badly at that.

A tangle of wires sprouted from the console on one side, branching out into a canopy that covered the ceiling. In the sporadic light, he could just make out the vortex enabler above the wires to which they were attached. It was akin to the one he used to have in the TARDIS – only that had been much less messy.

He moved carefully across the inclined floor until he reached the far console. The wires clumped together, and were fed through a narrow, cylindrical affair into the console itself. The cylinder was charred and battered, but evidently still functional. An actuator rod.

'How very interesting,' the Doctor muttered. 'I've not seen one of these since –'

There was a sound to his right. The Doctor peered down into the darkness.

'Hello? Don't be scared. I'm here to help.'

There was a flicker of light, and he could make out a bulky shape – arms and legs, a figure – slumped on the floor with its back to a control bank. As the cabin went dark again, the Doctor reached out his hand in the direction of the ship's occupant.

'I'm the Doctor,' he said. 'Who are you?'

The creature looked up, the little light there was glinting off his visor.

'I am lost,' said the creature. He extended his arm towards the Doctor, and fired.

∞

They headed as quickly as they could back down the road to Jerusalem. The weather wasn't helping Stacy clear her head; she just kept turning her thoughts over and over and getting nowhere. Ssard had said very little since they left the house, and she wondered whether he was keeping quiet out of concern for her. She was about to ask him when she realised that she could hear the biomechanisms in his armour straining with the effort of keeping up with her. Despite herself, she smiled.

'You need oiling.'

'My armour isn't suited to this environment.'

She looked down the road, and in the distance she could see the buildings in the city ahead of them.

'I'd rather not be here, either,' she said. Ssard stopped and took her hand, closing his heavy clamp around her fingers as gently as he could.

'Ow.'

'Sorry,' hissed the Martian, relaxing his grip. 'But I understand. I've been considering your question.'

'What? Oh –'

Ssard nodded. 'I wouldn't want to visit the age of Oras.' He placed his hand against his chest. 'It's not him that matters to me. It's his ideas.'

Stacy grimaced. 'They do say you should never meet your heroes. I don't think meeting your messiahs is a good one either.' She could scarcely believe she was being so flippant about it; but perhaps that was the best way to avoid dwelling on the implications. They turned and carried on walking, a little slower than they had before, the sky getting gloomier. Night must be closing in, she thought.

Soon they approached the fork in the road by the hillside.

'Okay,' said Stacy, 'Where now?'

'The craft cannot be in the city. Otherwise the woman would have seen it.'

'But it could be camouflaged. Like the TARDIS should be.'

Ssard inclined his head. 'Then I suggest we find a vantage point on the hillside.' He touched his clamp to his visor. 'I am equipped to scan for disruptions in local energy fields.'

'You sure know how to sweet talk a girl.'

Ssard continued: 'There may be something that shows us – me where the vessel is.' He smiled.

Stacy smiled back. They began climbing the path.

∞

The Doctor blinked and the hollow was empty. The only way he could tell that the ship had been there – that it might *still* be there – was the itch in his mind. He studied the shape of the space around him, squinting when he realised that he couldn't quite make it out. It wasn't just the late light, it was as though the ground hadn't decided whether the vessel had crashed or not.

'Just like Lazarus,' he muttered.

There was an arc of silent lightning over him, sketching in the shape of the ship. He slipped and slithered across the rocks, waiting in one particular spot until the craft dematerialised about him. The creature was standing now, a couple of steps in front of him, but took a second before it registered that the Doctor had moved. The creature turned, but the Doctor seized his arm.

'Wait. Wait!' the Doctor implored. 'I want to help you. Tell me about Lazarus.'

The creature hesitated, then slumped, his hands falling on to the console beside him.

And they were hands, the Doctor realised; five fingers at the end of each slender, scaly arm. It looked up at him. In the flickering light, he could see that its helmet was elongated, more reptilian than Ssard's, but it was still recognisably an Ice Warrior.

'I came to find my messiah,' the Martian hissed. 'But he no longer exists.'

'You're from the Intent, aren't you?'

The acolyte didn't look up. 'I thought I'd found him. The relic helped me trace him through the vortex.'

The Doctor looked at the scorched actuator rod in the control deck.

'It's got a fine sense of irony then. It was after *your* Lazarus, the fake, and it located the original.' He paused, changing his tone. 'Where did you find it?'

'On Sontara.'

'The sign of the lights,' the Doctor breathed. 'Of course!'

'When I connected the relic with the ship it brought me here.' The Martian's voice was almost plaintive. 'It told me I'd found the man. But he was not my messiah. He was not Lazarus.'

'Oh, but he is,' the Doctor said. 'That's the thing about signs. You've got to be sure you read them correctly.' He cast an eye over a control bank, examining the readings. 'Yes, yes,' he muttered. 'I think we could do something here. Why were you looking for him, by the way? I heard the Intent had been fulfilled.'

The Ice Warrior looked at him, his visor glowing a ghostly red. 'You know the persecution my kind faced from our so-called brethren? A religion that preaches acceptance and sacrifice, and all they could do was turn on the unlike.'

'That's not fair. The trouble with the intolerant minority is that they tend to be disproportionately loud.' He gazed round the shabby ship. 'Empty vessels and all that.'

'Word went round that the messiah was beyond our reach. It made me more determined to find him. I wanted to prove to them what he was truly like.'

'I'm not sure that would have been a terribly good idea.'

'But he didn't exist. Nowhere, nowhen. Only this – wretched human.'

'So you shot him? That's not going to do anyone any good.'

The Martian hung his head, leaning in towards the Doctor and resting his hands on his shoulders. The Time Lord found himself patting the back of the scaly armour, feeling rather absurdly that he should be comforting it.

'Hey, hey. Everyone could use a second chance, couldn't they?'

∞

Ssard struggled in the stronger gravity, the tendons in his armour working hard to keep him moving. But it was getting cooler as the sun sank, and Stacy seemed a bit more relaxed. They stopped to look back at Jerusalem at a turn in the path. A little awkwardly, Ssard hissed: 'I will scan the settlement.' He activated his head-up display.

'It's a pity it's still overcast,' said Stacy, looking up the hillside away from the city. 'We might have seen Mars.'

Ssard idly wondered what his ancestors – or his descendants – would be doing, fifty million miles away across the solar system. His gaze swept over the landscape, but, as he had imagined, there was no sign of any energy disruption or chameleon field in the city below them. 'I cannot detect –'

'Wait,' said Stacy, tugging at his arm. 'That feeling – déjà vu –'

'If there is time technology at work, it may be a side-effect,' Ssard realised.

'Couldn't it have been more than that?'

Ssard thought better of pursuing the matter. He changed his visor's settings and started scanning again.

'Wait,' said Stacy. 'I thought I saw something.' She pointed up the hillside. 'It looked like a cloud shadow, the way it flickered, but it's not sunny enough. And it didn't move.' She pointed. 'There!'

'It's not like any chameleon field I've ever seen,' said Ssard. He watched the rocks fade, then darken, then fade and disappear again. A large, round shape sat atop them. 'Is that the ship? It's as though it is not there at all when it is camouflaged.' He tried to get a fix on the object, gauge its distance. It was difficult to tell from the vessel itself, but the surrounding rocks were a several hundred metre climb.

'Talking of camouflage... ' Stacy gestured to the left of the object, where a smaller, boxier shape was perched. 'So the Doctor did find a way to bring the TARDIS here.' He

thought he heard a trace of anger in her voice, and before he could stop her she pressed on up the hillside ahead of him.

∞

Ssyryx sat in the shadows as the stranger moved around the vessel, adjusting settings, rewiring components and getting it into some semblance of working order. The darkness soothed him, helped him clear his head. He remembered the vivid colours of the time vortex he had seen on the scanner as the ship travelled, the disorientation he felt when he arrived, that sense of never quite being here. The stranger had promised to save him. Indeed, his tone suggested he often made such promises.

He could return to the future and make a future of his own. The stranger would ensure that none of this had ever happened – said he knew one of the Prelectors of the Intent, someone who would help him understand what it meant to be a true Lazarene. And he believed the stranger; the man had a quality that made you believe, Ssyryx thought.

'There,' the stranger said. 'You're almost ready.'

'Who, Doctor?' This voice came from the airlock, higher in pitch. 'Who's ready?'

The newcomer's tone was shrill and Ssyryx did not like it.

'Stacy! Good to see you. Glad you found the ship at last. Ssard with you?'

'Don't, Doctor. There's no time for this.'

'No, you're right. In fact, you'd better stand clear. This ship is about to go places.'

The figure moved inside the ship and stood opposite the Doctor. It was a human, a human woman. 'I'm not going anywhere,' she said. 'Not until I know what's going on here.'

Ssyryx stepped out of the darkness between the two human figures, flinching as he did so, but raising his disruptor to cover the newcomer.

'Please,' he hissed. 'Do as the Doctor says.'

∞

Stacy looked from the Martian to the Doctor, horrified.

'Down!' hissed a voice behind her.

Stacy flung herself at the Doctor, pulling him to the floor as the air behind her shuddered with a disruptor blast. After a couple of seconds, she looked round. The ship had disappeared, and Ssard was standing where the airlock had been, his arm raised.

'Has it gone?' Stacy asked, panicked. She pushed herself upright.

'Unfortunately not,' the Doctor snarled, dusting himself down. 'Nice shooting, Ssard.'

'He was about to fire on Stacy.'

'No, no, no, no! I was about to send him home.'

'But –' Stacy began.

'But now the balance between the Eigen states has changed. It's hovering on the edge of having happened.'

'Eigen what?'

'The technology this vessel relies on should never have been used. There are two timelines vying for the same co-ordinates in space-time.'

'But that means you can still stop the ship from going back,' Stacy said, looking him right in the eye.

'It means that when the ship reappears I can remove it from history permanently.'

'I can't let you do that.'

'And I can't let you not. I'm sorry.'

There was a flicker of air around them. Stacy looked round and could see a light-edged phantom scurrying across the rocky ground towards Ssard. The Doctor had clocked him too.

'Ssard, look out!' he called. Then the ship snapped back into history around them.

∞

The ship solidified. Ssard lumbered round to look at the spot where Stacy and the Doctor had stood, and instantly regretted it.

His opponent's armour seemed much better suited to this environment, much more flexible, and he pinioned Ssard's clamps behind him. 'Please,' hissed the stranger. 'Do not move.'

Ssard struggled but the other Martian's grip was tighter than he would have imagined. He remembered as a child turning a rock to find a spider-lizard clinging to the underside, and no amount of prising or prodding had succeeded in removing it. He decided to relax a little.

'What are you doing here?' The stranger shivered a little, but said nothing. 'You killed the human, didn't you? Why?' There was still no answer.

'Why?' he repeated. 'Oras teaches us –'

'Oras? Who is Oras?' Then he didn't know, thought Ssard.

'He is our Lord. The Bringer of Light.'

Ssard was not expecting to be forced to the floor and he gasped. He rolled as the other Martian kicked him and ended up on his back. He watched as his opponent levelled his sidearm and a lizard like tongue flickered in his mouth. 'He is not my god, primitive. Lazarus is my saviour!'

Breathing raggedly, Ssard asked: 'Then why did you destroy him?'

'The human was an impostor, not the true incarnation.' But the other Martian seemed hesitant, his voice wavering. His arm drooped. 'I was lost,' he hissed. 'Scared.'

Ssard nodded and eased himself onto his elbows. 'There is no dishonour in that.'

'I thought all you barbarians cared about was honour.'

'Oras taught me more than that. And the friendship of humans has... '

'Humans?' the Martian spat. His anger seemed to have reasserted itself. 'They too are scared, and that fear leads to hatred. I could see it in his eyes and I knew then that he could not be my messiah.' He had brought his disruptor to bear again. 'He did not deserve to live, primitive, and neither do you.'

∞

The moment the ship reappeared, the Doctor left Stacy on the floor and hurried to the controls to check the settings he'd made before Ssard had shot things out of balance.

'What are you doing?' cried Stacy.

He turned back to Stacy and spread his arms. 'What we have is a ship that shouldn't be here. Like I said, he technology is all wrong for time travel. It's really only designed to project an object through the vortex, temporally but temporarily.'

'So?' Stacy snapped. The Doctor pointed at a rod-like component on the console.

'Ordinarily, this actuator rod is supposed to limit the subject's impact on history. It should reduce their reality quotient and prevent their actions influencing the web of time. So when I activate it, history will forget it was ever here. I hope.'

Stacy propped herself on her elbows and looked him right in the eye. 'But we both know it doesn't.'

He returned her gaze steadily. 'Do we? What is written about this moment doesn't mention us, it doesn't mention this ship or its pilot. All it remembers is –' he hesitated, choosing his words carefully '– a strange and beautiful event.'

'And what happens when you throw the switch? Does Lazarus just leap back into life?'

The Doctor turned and checked some more readings. 'I told you this thing was damaged. It may take a day or two of history for the Eigen state fluctuation to settle down.'

He lifted his hand to make another alteration to the settings, but Stacy grabbed his wrist from behind. 'I'm sorry, Doctor, but you can't.'

∞

The Doctor turned awkwardly in her grasp. 'Stacy, I *have* to do this.'

'You know what happens if you do, though. Lazarus comes back to life, but it isn't a miracle this time. Just a quirk of science.'

'But we know he comes back to life. It puts history back on its course.'

'Don't you *understand?* If I let you do it, I'll know it was you that saved Lazarus, and not –' She gritted her teeth. 'I mean, are all of his miracles so much technobabble?'

'We're dealing with Eigen states here, you can never be that certain about anything. It's the *idea* of Lazarus that matters, it's the idea that survives, all the way down history.'

'You don't understand, Doctor. I don't care about the web of time. I –'

From outside, there came a rumbling yell of pain. Stacy stared at the Doctor for a long moment, then let him go and raced to the door of the cabin.

Slipping on the uneven floor, she fell on her side. She hauled herself into the doorway and looked out into the wet night. The Martian was crouched over a dark shape on the ground. Then he turned and began to make his way back towards the ship. As he moved, Stacy could see Ssard sprawled over the rocks behind him. He lay absolutely still. 'No!' she cried.

And again the thoughts came before she could stop them: the other Martian's impact on history was increasing and there was only one way it could be reversed. As he scurried towards her, raising his arm, Stacy shook her head then turned to the Doctor. 'Do it,' she sobbed.

Without a word, the Doctor turned and completed the sequence of switches. Stacy closed her eyes, and when she opened them again, the ship wasn't there. It had never been there.

Down in the rocks in front of her, the bulky shape of Ssard stirred and began to get up. The Doctor helped Stacy to her feet and together they stumbled across the hillside to help him. The clouds were dispersing, and the stars and planets started to shine down on them.

vince danks / roger gibson / after gustave doré

Missing Episode

Roger Gibson

The starting point for this story was an exploration of The Watcher (as seen in Logopolis*) – what was it, and why did it appear? After discussions and rewrites, this element drifted away, though we still have an examination of the role of the TARDIS in the Doctor's regeneration, and how this might work in a crisis. Through the discussions with Justin, a new direction seemed too much fun to resist – what if the Eighth Doctor had had his own TV series, produced by Russell T Davies, with the same model to which we're now accustomed: 45 minute episodes and a hefty dose of emotional content? What would the opening titles look like? And what if Bill Nighy got to be the Doctor after all, if only briefly? That's what I've aimed for here – a 45 minute TV episode, where the pace doesn't let up for a moment, full of expensive CGI – and it's the Eighth Doctor's 'Doctor-lite' episode too! Oh, and we even have a preview of the next episode – could that really be the Time War we're glimpsing... ?*

Continuity announcer: 'This is BBC1. At seven forty-five, *Celebrity Fame Academy*. Can Jonathan Ross survive another appearance in the circle of fear? But first... is the Doctor seeing double...?'

Fade briefly to black. Open again to a TARDIS interior. Warmth and familiarity. Look, there's the Doctor, and Fitz. But something awful is going to happen. Hang on to the sofa. Hold your breath. Don't let go.

∞

'To be honest, I'm not totally convinced you know what you're doing.'

Fitz glanced up casually from his battered copy of *TV Comic*, watching the Doctor as he scurried around the TARDIS console, frantically pushing buttons, flicking switches, pulling levers. The TARDIS rumbled disconcertingly, shuddering in protest as the Doctor attempted seemingly more random combinations of switches and levers. Curious grinding and clanking noises were echoing from somewhere deep within the ship.

'I know exactly what I'm doing, Fitz,' the Doctor replied brusquely. He tugged down the dusty old TV monitor from above the console, looking at it with some concern, pushing it back up again impatiently. 'This is a very simple and straightforward procedure.' The Doctor turned to Fitz, beaming confidently for a moment. 'In fact, I think I've already

worked out what the problem is! This should do it!'

He tugged down another lever haphazardly, and a shower of sparks sprayed violently from the console. The Doctor leapt out of the way just in time, dusting off a couple of hot embers attempting to sizzle their way through his velvet jacket, staring at the uncooperative console, a bemused expression on his face. 'Though I think I may have spoken a little too soon... '

'Why bother trying, anyway?' asked Fitz, leaning back lazily in his comfy chair, sipping at a hot mug of cocoa. His attention was once more on the tatty old comic, trying not to think about the awful groans and creaks echoing around him. Distant crashes and bangs were now becoming evident from somewhere deep within the TARDIS. 'What's the point in deleting old rooms? You might need them again. What if you've left something important in one of them, you'd lose it for good.'

'It's just a standard TARDIS reconfiguration,' the Doctor snapped back, testily. 'I can't let her keep on growing rooms indefinitely, it just gets too... oh, I don't know... too complex, Fitz! And anyway, the wardrobe room keeps moving; it's become a devil of a job finding the right shirt. What do you mean I'd lose something important?'

'Well, did you check?' asked Fitz, unfazed by the sudden conversational skip and jump. 'I mean, you're not exactly known for your razor sharp memory these days. What if you've left something valuable in one of the rooms you're deleting?' Fitz turned the page to *Beetle Bailey*, his attention drifting again. 'Something like, I dunno, your sonic thingummy, or the keys to the Volkswagen, or your hairspray for those natural curls, or maybe that stupid robot dog thing you were working on last month. Come to think of it, I haven't seen Trix yet this morning. What if you deleted her by accident?' For a moment, Fitz's spirits lifted.

'Of course I checked!' the Doctor replied. 'You don't really think I'd be so absent minded as to start a full reconfiguration without first doing a thorough safety check, do you? Honestly, Fitz, what do you take me for?' The Doctor flicked another couple of switches casually, trying to look occupied. The curious creaks and groans continued to echo around them, increasing in frequency and volume. 'So...' he continued, 'so you said you hadn't seen Trix today... ?'

'Not since last night,' said Fitz. 'We were up quite late, finishing off that bottle of Château wotsit; I figured she'd probably appreciate a lie-in this morning.'

'Right... ' said the Doctor. A loud, juddering groan rang through the console room. He twiddled another couple of dials, whistling nervously, slowly pulling down the TV monitor again, and tapping at the screen with irritation. 'And so she'd be in her room... ?'

'I'd have thought so... why... ?'

The Doctor flicked a switch on the console.

'Trix. It's the Doctor. Are you awake?'

There was no reply. The Doctor was about to repeat his message, when the floor of the TARDIS lurched forty-five degrees, suddenly and violently. Fitz's chair began to slide under him, skidding down the slope, his cocoa splashing from his mug to the floor. Fitz grabbed tight hold of the chair, holding on for dear life, the TARDIS slowly beginning to correct itself, a loud, metallic groan rumbling through the ship. The disturbing crashes and bangs all around them were increasing in volume.

Somehow the Doctor had kept his footing. He flicked the switch again, more urgently this time. 'Trix? Trix, it's the Doctor. I need you to talk to me.' A muffled voice replied. It was difficult to hear, the terrible sounds around them so loud now, seemingly ripping and tearing at the fabric of the ship. There was a sudden scream over the intercom system. Slamming, crashing noises.

The TARDIS shuddered violently. Dust cascaded from the vaulted ceiling, the walls creaking around them, grinding against each other – Fitz could swear the room was starting to shrink. Or expand. He wasn't certain; it all seemed to be happening at once. More sparks showered impressively from the console. Everything was shaking, breaking apart.

'Trix?!!' the Doctor shouted. There was another scream over the intercom, and then static, and silence. Dead silence. 'Trix! Can you hear me...? Trix? TRIX?!'

∞

The theme music rushes in, terrifying, unearthly, Raudive scraping his nails down a quantum blackboard, or a Jack Kirby scream: NEEEEEAAAAOOOWWWW wubbly wum wubbly wum wubbly wum WUM WUM wubble wubbly wum wubbly wum wubbly wum ooooEEEEoooooo WOOOOOoooo.

Opening credits against a dazzling, shifting vortex of colour. The TARDIS hurtles down the swirling, blood red tube. The Doctor's face forms from the stuff of the Vortex, his hair snaking, streaming, blending into blue liquid plasma, a beautiful cosmic pre-Raphaelite, his eyes glowing, his lips smiling a rich, broad smile. Improbably, the Doctor winks.

Credits fade. Return to TARDIS interior, Trix's room. She's straight out of bed, wearing skimpy black knickers and a skin-tight lycra vest. A million dads cross their legs casually.

∞

Trix's room was coming apart around her. Shelves crashed to the floor, scattering their contents, pictures smashing down from the walls, revealing unnaturally glowing roundels

behind them. That much, Trix could just about have coped with. Danger was their business, as Fitz was so fond of mentioning. More disturbing was the fact that the walls were moving – not just shaking, but actually, physically moving: at first expanding, but now definitely contracting, moving closer in. The room was getting smaller somehow.

The Doctor was shouting something at her through the intercom, yelling at her. Couldn't he tell that she was busy dodging fixtures and fittings? Furniture continued to collapse around her as she staggered for the door, grabbing a pair of sneakers and some trousers by the side of the bed, deftly avoiding the wardrobe as it toppled and crunched down onto the chair, missing her by inches. The ceiling looked like it was about to cave in. The Doctor was still yelling at her over the speakers. She shouted back, but could barely hear herself think. She needed to get out of the room quickly. But the damn door kept moving further away.

∞

'Stay in your room, Trix!' The Doctor was shouting down the intercom, struggling to make himself heard as the TARDIS shook around him. 'You're safest in your room. Stay there!'

'I can't ...ear you Do...tor... the room's br...ing apart... heading f... the cons... room...'

'Don't leave your room, Trix! I'm coming to get you!'

STATIC

∞

Trix flicked off the switch with annoyance. Hearing the Doctor quoting Davina wasn't going to help matters – the room was coming to pieces around her, and there was no way she was waiting there, when the console room was just a few yards down the corridor. The walls of her room were moving in closer, squeezing, crunching against her bed – if she didn't move now, her way out was going to disappear completely. She vaulted over a couple of scattered chairs, grabbed the handle and tugged the door open, barely making it through, tripping and stumbling to the floor as she emerged in the corridor, hearing another crash as the door slammed shut behind her.

Trix slowly got to her feet, dusting herself down, slipping into the canvas trousers she'd rescued at the last minute, quickly shoving her feet into the pair of red Converse All Stars. The TARDIS was still rumbling all around her. Looking up after tying her bootlaces, she noticed that something was missing. The entrance to her room had vanished, replaced

by a standard white wall, covered in evenly spaced large roundels. Hidden behind the wall, crunching, grinding noises signalled the loss of whatever personal possessions she might have had. Easy come, easy go, she thought to herself.

∞

The Doctor had already raced towards the interior door, striding quickly through the shuddering Gothic interior of the console room, with Fitz close behind him. The Doctor slid to a sudden, alarming halt. Fitz didn't react quickly enough, slamming clumsily into the Doctor's back, knocking them both off their feet. With the benefit of his softer landing (all velvet and curls, grumbling beneath him), Fitz was the first to look up.

'Erm... where's the door gone?'

'I was wondering the same thing myself,' said the Doctor, dragging himself out from underneath Fitz, both of them getting to their feet. The TARDIS was still rumbling around them, the walls of the giant console room seeming to expand and contract at will, scattering the contents of shelves, cupboards and wardrobes. Small clouds of dust rained down from the distant ceiling with each shudder. 'Maybe the door's just moved. Come on, Fitz!' And he dashed along the wall, disappearing into the shadows.

∞

How could the door to her room just vanish? Trix moved closer to the new wall, looking for some sort of join where the door had been, sliding her fingers over the space where it had previously existed. There was clearly nothing there, no trace of it.

The floor was still unsteady under her feet, and curious rattles and mechanical groans were drifting threateningly along the corridor. It felt how Trix imagined an earthquake might feel, and the constant juddering was getting to her, making her feel queasy.

The obvious thing to do was to head for the console room. Meet up with the Doctor and try to find out what was going on. Trix set off at a rapid stride, moving along the white, roundelled corridor, taking her usual route. She had barely walked more than a few yards, when she met an unexpected dead end, right in front of her, blocking her route any further. This was definitely, Trix decided, getting really weird. Never once before had she hit a dead end in the TARDIS. On the contrary, the corridors always seemed to lead precisely where she wanted to go.

More disturbingly, she'd taken this route from her room many times – the dead end was where the door to the console room should be. And the wall blocking her access

was already moving towards her, rumbling ominously.

Trix backed away, slowly. Everything was shaking again. Loud scraping noises echoed down the corridor. And now the space was getting narrower, the side walls slowly shifting, moving in towards her, closing in threateningly, squeezing her back in the direction in which she had come.

Trix didn't need another hint – the TARDIS wasn't going to let her get to the console room that way, and as she turned to look back down the corridor, it was clear that there was only one route to safety – along the same route she had just taken, and keep on running.

∞

Fitz followed the Doctor as best he could. The console room was dark and cavernous, its walls barely discernable from the centre of the room. As Fitz made his way through the dimly lit space around the edges of the room, stepping carefully over trailing cables and wiring, clambering over random iron girders, the Doctor was always a few yards ahead, skipping nimbly over the various obstacles, sometimes stopping to run his hands over roundelled walls, and then once more on the move again, tracing his way around the vaguely circular interior. At the centre of the room, the console was now glowing a deep blood red, resembling more than ever a nightmarish iron spider, forbidding and terrifying. None of the displays on the console were lit.

The room had finally stopped shaking, but the awful grinding and crashing noises continued to echo from outside the console room, and Fitz was sure he could hear the distant, vague tolling of a bell. Something was seriously wrong with the TARDIS, and Trix was still out in that mess somewhere.

'Doctor, this isn't doing any good, there aren't any more doorways – there never have been.'

'Doorways can come and go, Fitz. You've lived in the TARDIS long enough to know that.' The Doctor rifled through the deep pockets of his velvet jacket, discarding a Mars Bar, a catapult and a seriously tatty bag of jelly babies, before locating his battered old sonic screwdriver, pointing it at the darkened roundels, and pressing the button. The screwdriver made a weak squawking sound, and then went dead. The Doctor looked at it with irritation, tapping the head of the screwdriver on the wall twice, then pointing it again, pressing the button once more. A vague glow, and it finally died.

'I'm not sure what you're trying to do,' said Fitz, 'but I think you've knackered your sonic thingummy.'

'Screwdriver, Fitz, it's a sonic screwdriver. I was trying to open a new doorway,

but I think it's worn out. Lack of use, I expect, entropy seems to have set in. Been meaning to design a new one.'

'Well, we've been around this room three times now, it's not doing any good. If we can't get out, how are we going to help Trix? We don't even know if she's alive out there.'

The Doctor looked up at him, slipping the broken sonic screwdriver back into his pocket. 'Do you have your mobile phone with you, Fitz?'

∞

Trix continued along the rumbling corridor. Behind her, the walls continued to close in, pushing her forward. She was barely staying more than a few metres ahead of the collapsing walls. With each step, she knew she was moving further and further away from the console room, but there was nothing else she could do, there was definitely no way back. She needed to get into a room, needed to find an intercom, needed to try to contact the Doctor. Her mobile had been back in her room, probably crunched into tiny pieces along with the rest of her possessions, and there was no communications system out here in the corridors. Right now, she was on her own. And ahead of her, the corridor had reached another dead end, a large, scruffy oak door blocking her passage.

The walls of the TARDIS were closing in behind her more rapidly. She glanced back, panic rushing through her again as she saw the route she had just taken literally folding up into itself, rushing towards her, collapsing in on her. With no other choice, she grabbed the handle, shoved the door open, and jumped inside, slamming the door shut behind her.

∞

'It's not connecting,' said Fitz, dialling again quickly, still getting no response. 'So either she's switched it off for some reason, or, I dunno, maybe she's dead or something.' He looked up a little hopelessly at the Doctor, unconsciously looking for reassurance.

'She's not dead, Fitz,' stated the Doctor, categorically. 'I won't allow it. Come and help me at the console, I need to get it up and running again. If we can at least get the ship's communications system working, we can try and find out where she is.'

'And how do we actually reach her once we find her?'

'I don't know yet,' the Doctor snapped, striding quickly over to the console, sliding underneath it, tugging open an access panel. 'Do you know anything about block transfer computation?'

∞

Trix found herself striding through long grass, a small hill ahead of her. Butterflies fluttered around her in what appeared to be some distress, the impossible open sky overhead quickly darkening, black clouds forming threateningly. Thunder rumbled as she moved forward, brushing the anxious butterflies from her face, trying to find another exit. Over by the side of the hill, she finally found what she'd been looking for, almost hidden in the long grass – an old intercom station. Running over to it, she brushed more butterflies away from the small screen, and took a closer look. It appeared to be an old 1960's television set, mounted on a rusting iron stand, with only minimal buttons: an on/off switch, a knob for volume, another for contrast, and a larger plastic dial, which clicked to three settings, marked 'BBC1', 'BBC2' and 'ITV'. Over the top of these were old, peeling labels, with scruffy handwriting she didn't recognise. The labels read, in turn: 'Console Room', 'Library', 'Sam (me)'. Keeping her fingers crossed, Trix clicked the 'on' switch, and changed the channel to 'Console Room'. As the black and white monitor slowly started to warm up and glow into life, rain began to pour from the sky overhead.

∞

'Doctor! Doctor, can you hear me...?'

Leaving Fitz knelt in a tangle of wires and cables, the Doctor leapt to his feet, grabbing the TV monitor above the console, tugging it down to eye level. Trix's voice was still barely discernable, static scattering across the image on the screen. The Doctor tapped it a couple of times with his finger, and the static cleared, a small black and white image of Trix slowly coming into view. She looked drenched, and rather panicked.

'I can hear you, Trix – where are you?'

'Can't you tell?' Trix replied with a little irritation, her hand swatting again, a sudden cloud of butterflies flapping across the screen.

'It appears to be raining in there,' commented Fitz, looking over the Doctor's shoulder. 'How can it be raining inside the TARDIS?'

'Doctor!' Trix interrupted, 'I can't stay in here. The TARDIS is collapsing around me, I don't know how long this room is going to stay intact.'

'You need to trust the TARDIS,' said the Doctor, 'there's a failsafe in the event of structural collapse. She'll lead you in the right direction. Don't fight it – if there's a route ahead of you, take it as quickly as you can.'

A loud rumbling came from the monitor – the Butterfly Room was already beginning to come apart. 'Doctor! Where do I go? It's breaking up!' More static filled the screen.

'Run, Trix! There'll be a route open for you! Follow it! RUN!!'

The screen filled with static and white noise. Before either the Doctor or Fitz could react, a terrible tearing noise ripped through the console room.

Fitz shouted.

The Doctor yelled something, but his voice was cut off, suddenly.

Dust showered down from the vaulted ceiling.

Something fell, violently, with a loud crash.

The TARDIS groaned, as if in agony.

For long moments after the dust settled, all that could be heard in the console room was the static from the fading monitor screen.

And then, silence.

∞

Lightning streaked violently across the impossible sky, followed moments later by an awful crash of thunder. The sky was ripping apart, and the ground beneath Trix's feet was churning, cracking, breaking into pieces. The monitor had crashed from its battered stand, falling into the long grass, but Trix had already left it behind, running through the rain, heading the only way she could. Ahead of her was another door, standing in the landscape incongruously. The soft ground cracked beneath her feet, tearing apart, leaving her no alternative. She grabbed for the handle, tugged the door open, and leapt through, slamming it shut behind her.

She was back in the TARDIS corridors again, but it was darker here, the lighting not as bright as she was accustomed, dim and threatening. A distant bell was tolling, and the lighting throbbed in time with the tolls. It felt old here, old and unused. The walls began to close in again, folding up behind her – she ran, the only direction she could, into the growing darkness.

∞

The Cloister Room shook, vines tumbling from ancient gothic arches, new cracks appearing in old stone. A figure flickered into view. And flickered out again. And then back again, the image uncertain: sometimes an old man, sometimes young, sometimes tall, sometimes short, flicking from image to image, until finally settling, choosing a form, the ghost taking shape. From somewhere close by, servo-motors whirred excitedly, rhythmically.

'Master...?'

∞

A dim light glowed from a room ahead of her. It was the only way forward, and behind her the corridors were still collapsing, still pushing her on, giving her no means of return. Trix slipped nimbly through the door, and closed it quickly behind her, hoping to shut out the chaos.

She was in a workshop of some kind. She'd never seen it before – shelves lined the room, filled with old spare parts, circuitry, tools, all manner of unrecognisable bits and pieces scattered randomly. In the centre of the room was a large, sturdy iron worktop. Perched on the table was some kind of half-built machine, curious circuitry spilling from open side panels, more wires straggling from what appeared to be some kind of head. The machine was vaguely dog shaped, with a rather ridiculous tail at the back. Some kind of robot? Fitz had mentioned a mysterious project the Doctor had been tinkering with recently, but surely it couldn't be this. Why would he need a robot dog?

'Danger, mistress!'

It just spoke. The dog just spoke.

'Danger, mistress!'

'Right. A robot dog that speaks. You're talking to me, I assume?'

'Affirmative, mistress,' replied the machine. 'This room will cease to maintain structural viability in one minute and twenty seven seconds. Suggest immediate relocation.'

'Good plan. Is there another way out of here?'

'There is a second exit behind the circuitry shelves, mistress. One minute and ten seconds.'

The room was shaking, the walls grinding again, shrinking in towards her, scattering the contents of the shelves across the floor noisily.

'Cheers mate, much appreciated!' Trix began to sprint for the door.

'Mistress? My motor functions are currently inoperable. In 58 seconds I will be crushed helplessly in the room. Requesting immediate assistance!'

Trix turned back towards the half-built machine. 'You want me to take you with me?' she asked, a little dryly.

'Affirmative, mistress! 50 seconds. Danger, mistress. Danger.'

Trix sighed to herself. 'Oh, for god's sake. Okay, I'll take the stupid robot dog with me. You look like you weigh a ton.'

'I am lightweight but durable, mistress. 30 seconds.'

'Right! Right, I'm coming.' The room was beginning to fold into itself, collapsing around her. There were only moments to spare. Stuffing the loose wiring into K9's open

side panels, Trix slammed his panels shut and grabbed him as best she could, hauling him off the worktop, bundling him over to the exit door, shoving it open with her foot and charging through it, slamming the door shut behind her.

∞

Trix fell back against the door, taking a breath, holding onto K9, already doubting his claim to be lightweight. He really did weigh an absolute ton. She plonked him down onto the weathered stone floor rather roughly. K9 wagged his tail gratefully in response, a couple of stray sparks accompanying the movement. His one ear, a rather ridiculous looking miniature radar dish, scanned to and fro, presumably taking in the surroundings. If she was going to have to carry the thing much further, she was going to need a little help. Help that suddenly came striding towards her, out of nowhere.

'Hello! My name's the Doctor, and this is my friend K9. You've obviously already met.' He looked at her warily. 'You're not trying to nick him, are you...?'

The figure leaned over Trix, his eyes fixed on her, grinning like a loon. He held her gaze for a moment, then stuck out his hand, grabbing hers, shaking it in exaggerated welcome, striding suddenly off to her right, beginning to pace back and forth, hands stuffed in his pockets, looking for something in them, not finding it.

'You actually weren't trying to nick him, were you?' he grinned. 'I know an honest face when I see one. Think I do anyway. Not one hundred per cent reliable on that one, have to say. So! Yes!' His pacing became quicker. 'Me. You. K9. What are we doing in the Cloister Room? Not quite got my head in gear yet.'

Trix just stared at him for a moment, lost for words. Whoever this man was, he was full of manic energy, pacing this way and that, his head clearly thinking a hundred different things at once. He was tall, perhaps in his late fifties, with a handsome lined face, a mop of floppy hair, wearing a jet black suit, a purple shirt buttoned almost up to the neck, with a red, loosely fastened tie, and what appeared to be Dunlop Green Flash plimsolls. He looked a bit like Bryan Ferry's dad, actually. Or how Trix imagined Bryan Ferry's dad would look, if he was a bit unhinged and slightly more posh.

'Look, whoever you are, I don't think we're safe here. We need to keep moving. This... room... or whatever it is... could collapse in on us at any minute.'

'Nonsense!' said the Doctor – or whoever he was, Trix didn't really care right now. 'We're in the Cloister Room. Temporal grace, and all that stuff. Nothing can hurt you in here, trust me!' He slapped his hand on an old stone gothic arch, affectionately. Dust rained down over his head. He scuffed it off his shoulders casually. 'We just need to get back up to the console room.'

'That's the problem!' Trix replied, irritated. 'I can't get back there. The TARDIS is falling to pieces around us. Look, who are you?'

'I'm the Doctor!' the stranger replied, grinning again. 'We've been through that once. You're my companion, yes? Erm... Sarah Jane...? Victoria...?'

'Trix,' she replied, tapping her foot impatiently.

'Trix! Of course! You'll have to forgive me; I'm still a little rusty. Regeneration. Recognised old K9 though! You know me, don't you, little fella?' He knelt on one knee next to the robot dog, tickling him behind his radar ear affectionately.

'Affirmative, master!' K9 chirped, wagging his tail.

'And oh look, K9! You're all broken!' The Doctor tugged open one of the side panels, appalled by the mess of half-finished wiring and circuitry he found. 'What happened to you? I'm surprised you're even running!'

'The Doctor has been rebuilding me,' replied K9, 'He has yet to install complete mobility. I am currently active due to self preservation module x-135, running on power reserves of five per cent, and falling.'

'Then we'd better get you to safety as quickly as we can, hadn't we?' The Doctor got to his feet, clapping his hands together determinedly, grinning again. 'You too, Ace, what do you say?'

'Trix,' she repeated, looking at him witheringly.

'Trix! Yes! Come on, let's find an access panel. Maybe a ventilation shaft! They're always fun! I get to go in first!' The Doctor strode off, excitedly. Trix sighed, hauling K9 up into her arms with some difficulty, following a few paces behind him.

∞

'Look,' said Trix, watching as the Doctor tugged aside a trailing section of vines, finding a roundel behind them, pulling it open to reveal a mess of glowing wires and circuitry behind it, reaching in and fiddling with them, connecting and reconnecting apparently at random, 'you can't be the Doctor. I spoke to him just a few minutes ago. He's in the console room with Fitz.'

'I'd be having fits too if I knew you were trapped down here!' the Doctor replied, stuffing a couple of wires back into the wall, pulling out more, sorting through them.

Fitz!' Trix replied. 'Not 'fits', Fitz!'

'Sorry! Yes, Fitz!' the Doctor grinned. 'Scottish, wears a kilt. I'll be right as rain in a few minutes. Just having a bit of trouble with the old noggin.' He tapped his fingers to his forehead. 'Should have got the memories by now. Haven't yet. Regeneration's a tricky business at the best of times. Hold this, will you?' Trix held the mess of wires, trying not to

imagine how stupid Fitz would look in a kilt. She was certain he wouldn't have the knees for it.

'Fitz isn't Scottish,' she replied. 'You haven't answered my question. How did you end up down here so quickly, ahead of me?'

He turned to her, looking her in the eye, seeming lost for a moment, hesitating. 'Look, I don't know, do I?' he replied, exasperated, concentrating back on the wires. 'Something must have happened to me up there, Happened to us, to me and Jamie. Fitz. Sorry. I must have died, or something, and here I am. Maybe I found some way out of the console room, but it turned out to be really risky.' He looked her in the eyes again. 'Look, I really don't know. Hand me those wires back.'

'Well, if it was really risky, what about Fitz?' Trix was getting a little anxious now.

'We'll know more when I can find us a safe way out,' answered the Doctor, evasively. 'I think I've managed to bypass the standard reconfiguration matrix. If we can find a power source, I think I can open up a new corridor.' He closed the roundel, looking around him. The ground shook underneath their feet.

'It's reached in here,' said Trix.

'That's impossible,' said the Doctor, 'the Cloister Room is in a perpetual state of temporal grace. This room always exists. It can't reach in here.' The ground shook again, an arch crumbling a few feet away from them.

'Well, I think it just has!'

∞

Ignoring the rumbling beneath their feet, the Doctor was already sprinting across a stone courtyard, reaching a small water fountain, looking around it, finally locating the button he was looking for and pressing it. The fountain slid to one side, revealing a hand-shaped pad. The Doctor looked at it, hesitating for a moment.

'What does that do?' asked Trix, catching up to him, struggling with K9's weight now, lowering him down to the ground to take a brief rest.

'Oh, this?' he replied, gesturing to the hand shaped pad. 'It's... er... it's just a security thing. I just need to... er... just need to kind of put my hand on it, and then we'll be secure, you know? Safe as houses!' He grinned a little unconvincingly.

'Well then, what are you waiting for?' she asked. The ground shuddered under their feet, a little more violently this time.

'Yes, yes, you're right, what am I waiting for? Yes...' He stepped back, clapping his hands together, stretching a little, jumping up and down on the spot a couple of times,

blowing on his hands, stretching again, moving his right hand towards the pad, hesitating for a moment, pulling it back again, blowing on it once more.

'What are you doing, Doctor?' asked Trix, 'we've probably got five minutes at the most before this room starts folding in on us. If this helps open up that corridor...'

'Seven minutes and 35 seconds to structural integrity collapse,' chirped K9.

'Yes! Yes, thank you, K9,' said the Doctor, bracing himself, moving his hand towards the pad again, hesitating once more.

'You're sure this is just a security pad?' asked Trix.

'Oh yes, yes...' the Doctor replied, 'just erm . . . just security . . . look, would you give me a countdown or something?'

'A countdown?'

'Yes, you know – five... four... like that!'

'Is this really necessary, Doctor?' said Trix, her irritation increasing.

'Yes! Or I wouldn't ask you! Just do it for me Trix – go like this: five... four... three... two... ONE!' and as he shouted out the final number, the Doctor suddenly slammed his hand down onto the pad, holding it there. Dazzling red light streamed from the pad, accompanied by a loud roar – and the Doctor screamed. Energy coursed around his body, fizzing and crackling, his eyes and his teeth white hot as he screamed a second time, his body arching and convulsing. Trix didn't know what to do – the energy seemed to be coming from his own body, not from the pad – pouring from the Doctor, pouring into the device. Whatever it was, it was sucking the life out of him. The Doctor roared again, light streaming from his eyes, from his nose, from his mouth – Trix made a decision – she grabbed at him, wrenching him away, pulling his hand from the pad, and they tumbled together into a heap onto the ground, the firework display over as soon as it had begun.

Trix looked down at the Doctor - he appeared to be unconscious. 'Doctor?' she said, leaning over him, 'Doctor, are you okay?'

His eyes shot open, and he grinned at her.

'Of course I'm fine, Jo!' He sat up, all of a sudden. 'Come on, we should be able to find that corridor now!' And with that, he was up and already scampering across the courtyard.

'Doctor!' Trix called after him. 'That wasn't a security thing, was it?'

The Doctor stopped and turned around, grinning at her. 'Nope,' he said, 'I lied! I was just providing us with a power source. Nothing to worry about!' For a moment, his hair crackled and fizzed with energy. He brushed his hands through it, grinning again. 'I'm fine, really! No need to worry! Do you want a hand there with K9?'

∞

The Doctor and Trix were running now, with the Doctor leading the way. K9 was strapped to his back with vines, the robot dog's single ear whirring and whizzing. Trix was following right behind them, dodging stones as they smashed at her feet. She still had no real idea if this man in front of her really was who he claimed to be, but it was so easy to accept that it could be true – within moments of meeting him, they were already hurtling together at top speed, avoiding danger, with barely a moment to think. Rather than worrying about his own safety, this new Doctor kept checking over his shoulder, making sure Trix was right behind him, pulling her out of the way when tumbling masonry came too close, chatting casually to K9 as they ran. It seemed a real reunion of old friends. The little dog had accepted him immediately without question – should Trix be any less generous?

'There's another exit back here!' shouted the Doctor, over the roar of the crumbling Cloister Room. 'If the bypass worked, it should at least provide us with a new corridor!'

Large cracks were appearing in the walls of the gothic architecture around them. The sky overhead was darkening, clouds gathering, just as they had in the Butterfly Room. Already light rain was beginning to fall. Trix rushed on, hopping and skipping over the tumbling obstacles. There was a sudden, almost blinding flash of lightning, and for a moment Trix caught a glimpse of the Doctor, lit by the violent streak. Curiously, he seemed to flicker briefly, as though he wasn't completely there, become momentarily insubstantial, and suddenly his form changed – no longer in the suit, for a couple of seconds he seemed slightly shorter and a little younger, his hair close cropped and receding, wearing what appeared to be Fitz's old leather jacket. Trix blinked and looked again – the Doctor was back to his previous form, tall and wearing the black suit. Aware that she'd stopped, the Doctor turned back to look at her.

'Come on, Trix, we're running out of time!' He grinned at her and set off at a sprint, and Trix ran behind, doing her best to keep up.

∞

They were approaching the other end of the huge Cloister Room. Large puddles splashed and splattered under their feet, vines trailing treacherously, rain pelting over them, more of the architecture crumbling around them. The door was in sight ahead, but the Doctor was faltering, coming to a halt, breathing hard. He tugged K9 off his shoulders, putting him down on the dampening ground, trying to catch his breath. Trix caught up to him, her hand on his shoulder, concerned.

'Are you alright, Doctor?'

'I'm fine...' he gasped, 'we're almost there... just need to rest for a few seconds...'

Trix glanced down at him. 'Doctor...'

'What is it, Trix? Really, just give me a moment.'

'But you're the Doctor. You never get tired.'

The Doctor looked up at her, rain splashing onto his face. He looked pale, the lines chiselled a little deeper somehow. 'I don't know, Trix. I feel... I feel rather odd. It's probably just the regeneration... if the TARDIS was breaking down, halfway through the procedure, perhaps it's affected it somehow.'

'Three minutes to structural integrity collapse,' K9 chimed. 'Danger, master. Danger!'

'I know, K9,' the Doctor replied, hauling himself back up, strapping K9 back onto his shoulders. 'Come on, Trix, I'm sure it's nothing, we need to get a move on.' And suddenly he was off at a run again, skipping and jumping over obstacles as if he'd never stopped, Trix doing her best to keep up.

∞

As the Cloister Room literally collapsed behind them, the Doctor and Trix hurled themselves through the door, slamming it shut. The Doctor looked around quickly, K9 still strapped to his back, scanning the newly created TARDIS corridor. The walls glowed a burnt orange colour, the roundels deep red, throbbing disturbingly. As Trix looked up the corridor, the walls seemed to expand and contract at random, sometimes appearing to lead somewhere, other times closing off, rushing briefly towards them, and then back again.

'It's not remaining stable!' shouted the Doctor, over the sound of grinding, scraping walls and doors. 'I tried to open up a direct route to the console room, but I'm not sure how long it's going to hold!'

'Structural integrity inherently unstable, master!' K9 agreed, his one good ear still whizzing and whirring, taking in whatever information he could.

'We don't have any other alternative, Doctor!' Trix replied, 'You can hear the sounds. The TARDIS is taking itself apart, room by room. If this corridor leads back up to the console room, at least we have a chance of escape. We have to take it, Doctor!'

Ahead of them, the route was still closing and reopening, starting to collapse and fold in on itself, and then reforming, the grinding and crashing noises increasing in intensity all around them. The Doctor lowered K9 from his back, kneeling down, opening a red, glowing roundel.

'K9, I need you to connect directly into the architectural inhibitor interface – whenever you notice the frequency change, correct it. I need you to keep this corridor stable for as long as you can.'

'Affirmative, master,' the little dog chirped, extending a long aerial from his nose, plugging it directly into the exposed cabling. As K9's powerful computer brain corrected and re-corrected, the route ahead of them slowly began to stabilise. The noises around them were still terrible, but the corridor was remaining constant.

'Okay, Doctor, we have to move!' said Trix.

'You have to move,' replied the Doctor. 'Get to the console room. You need to open the main doors. Open them and get out. I have to stay here and find Fitz.'

'You think he might be down here somewhere?' asked Trix, hanging on for a moment as the TARDIS rumbled again beneath their feet.

'I don't know,' replied the Doctor, 'I still can't remember what triggered the regeneration. All I can remember is reviving in the Cloister Room. Something terrible must have happened – but if I survived, then there's a chance that Fitz did too, and that he's down here looking for me.'

'Then I'll help you look for him. I'm not leaving without you, Doctor!' The TARDIS rumbled again, violently.

'We don't know where he is, Trix. I need you to get to the console room and find out if he's there. If he's not, I need you to check outside, see if he's been able to escape. If you find him, both of you come and get me.'

'Damn it, Doctor!'

The walls began to grind and crunch again. 'There's no time to argue, Trix! Go now! I'll be close behind you!'

Trix swore, hugged the Doctor quickly, and then ran as fast as she could, up the careening corridor, heading for the safety of the console room. Once out of earshot, the Doctor sighed to himself, and sat down quietly next to K9.

'Can you keep the corridor stable long enough for her to get up there, K9?'

'Affirmative, master. I have scanned our immediate environment, however. There are no other life forms present within what remains of the TARDIS interior.'

'Except for...?' asked the Doctor, quietly, lifting up his hand, looking at it. For a moment, it broke into a thousand small blocks as he watched, the blocks turning vaguely, keeping shape, following the contours of where his fingers had been. He flexed them, making a fist, then spread his fingers again. He concentrated hard, and his hand became solid once more, flesh and blood. He brushed his fingers through his hair, flicking it casually back into place, leaning back quietly against the wall.

'Except for the console room, master. There are two life forms present in the console room. A humanoid male, and yourself, the Doctor.'

'I sort of thought there might be,' said the Doctor, quietly. He tapped the back of his head lightly against the wall behind him, almost as if to convince himself of his own

existence. 'Curious, don't you think, K9? How I can be in two places at one time?'

'Affirmative, master. However, my sensors indicate that you are, indeed, the Doctor-master.'

'Yes,' said the Doctor. 'Yes, I am.' He smiled at K9 affectionately. 'I'm relieved that you think so, old friend, that you never for a moment doubted me. Unfortunately, that does put us in a bit of a pickle.' He held up his hand again. Once more, flesh and blood was changing, morphing into blocks, connecting, dividing, connecting again. He looked at his fingers, stared at them hard, made them flesh again. 'It's getting more difficult to hold together,' he sighed. 'I do keep concentrating the best I can, but I'm so tired, K9.' He paused for a moment, and spoke again, more quietly this time. 'You know, I don't think I'm supposed to be here. I don't think it's actually my turn yet. I've always thought of myself as a man before my time... and now... well, now it seems to be literally true...'

He sighed again, trembling a little. 'I'm cold...' he said, wrapping his arms around himself, his fingers clinging onto his jacket, hugging himself, not wanting to let go. He looked around, thinking about getting up again, finding himself unable to do so, his legs no longer responding, his body already numb from the waist down. 'This is a stupid death,' he smiled, 'where are the Daleks? Where's the glorious ending? I've barely had half an hour this time!' He sighed, and for a moment, his entire form shimmered, flickering, becoming insubstantial, and then reforming again. He spoke again, with difficulty this time. 'Would you do me a favour. K9?'

'Affirmative, master.' The doggie wagged his tail, a little mournfully.

'Just scan me, will you? How long would you say I've got before my integral structural matrix dissipates?'

'Integral structural matrix due to dissipate in 75 seconds, master...' K9 replied, uncharacteristically quietly.

'That's what I thought,' said the Doctor. 'That's just what I thought'. He paused, thinking to himself for a moment. 'Fancy joining me in a little song, K9?'

'Affirmative, master,' K9 chirped.

'Then we'd best make it a quick one,' he smiled. He sat back quietly, tickling K9 affectionately behind his little radar ear, whistling a little tune. K9 whistled along with him, wagging his tail in time to the music.

The end came very quickly.

∞

'Trix! There you are!'

The Doctor and Fitz rushed to hug Trix as she fell through the newly created

doors into the console room, Fitz closing them quickly behind her. Trix shook with relief, and then pulled herself away from the Doctor, suddenly looking at him.

'You're here!' she said. 'You're both here! How can you be here if you're there?'

The Doctor was rushing around the newly lit console, stabbing buttons, flicking switches.

'You'll have to give me a moment, Trix. The power returned only moments before you came through the doors. If I can reroute the Artron energy and... just a minute... ' he flicked another couple of switches, turning a dial rapidly, 'and reconfigure the architectural matrices... and... Voilà!' He grinned at them both triumphantly. 'It's stabilised! I'm not sure what we've got left out there, but the corridor that Trix used should remain in place, and in a few days, we might be able to retrieve a few more of the areas that we've lost. It's been a bit of a trial for the old girl, but with a little care and attention, we should have her up and running in no time. Now, what were you saying, Trix?'

Trix looked at him, a mixture of astonishment and relief pouring through her. 'You were there,' she said, 'out there in the TARDIS with me – I was sure it was you – but you looked different – older, a different voice, different clothes, but I was certain it was you. You said you'd regenerated... '

The Doctor looked concerned, not looking at her, flicking a couple of switches, checking a monitor read-out.

'Well, we did have a bit of a drama in here, but nothing a dustpan and brush won't clear up. Certainly nothing fatal. Regenerated, you say?'

'And there was a dog – a robot dog. K9. Look, they're probably still down there, I only left them both a couple of minutes ago.'

The Doctor continued to read the display, looking concerned, twisting another couple of dials, looking up at her.

'Take me there,' he said.

∞

The corridor was quiet. Still connected to the cables inside the roundel, K9 was silent, his red eyes dimmed, lifeless. The Doctor knelt next to him, checking in a side panel, fiddling with wiring.

'He's completely burnt out,' said the Doctor. 'To be honest, I'm surprised he was operating at all. There's extensive damage in here, parts that it's going to be very difficult to replace. It could be months before I can get him working again.'

Fitz looked down at the Doctor, smiling at him wryly. 'So you lose the robot dog. Big deal. How much use can a stupid robot dog be?'

'This stupid robot dog saved all our lives, Fitz. If he hadn't kept that corridor open, we'd never have got power back in the console room. Eventually it would have collapsed in on us. We'd run out of options.'

'So where has the other Doctor gone?' asked Trix. There was no sign of him, no indication that he'd ever been there.

'He's no longer here,' said the Doctor. 'I've scanned thoroughly, there's no-one in the TARDIS but the three of us. I think he was a malfunction. A shadow.' He sat back, closing K9's side panel quietly.

'He was very real,' Trix replied. 'I touched him, hugged him – I saw the rain splashing from his face.'

'You misunderstand me,' said the Doctor. 'He was real enough. When I regenerate, Trix... when I die and take on a new form... the TARDIS is part of that process. I can't do it without her. But everything collapsed, nothing was working as it should. I think... I think the TARDIS created a new persona for me, my next regeneration, but a little prematurely. She's done something similar before. The Watcher... and I think that's what he was, made whole somehow. A hologram of sorts, built from the TARDIS... I think... I think he was supposed to be the next me...'. The Doctor's voice trailed off, lost in thought.

'So you'll turn into him again?' asked Trix, struggling to understand all of this.

'I don't know,' said the Doctor, locking K9's panel, standing up. 'I think he's gone. I don't know.'

The Doctor paused for a moment, and then grinned at them both. 'Frankly, for the moment, at least, I'm afraid you're both stuck with me. Look, this is all very maudlin. Anybody fancy some tea?'

With a crackle and a spark, K9's tail wagged, ever so slightly.

∞

Music rushes in, out of nowhere. The preview for the next episode flashes by. A domed citadel, the crystal dome suddenly shattering as saucers rain down angrily from the sky. Screams. Death and ray guns. Fitz suddenly angry, yelling at the Doctor: 'I can't support you this time! It's happening all over again! You're wrong, Doctor. They're all going to die and I can't be responsible this time!' More squealing ray blasts. A planet shaking apart. The Doctor screaming. A familiar enemy rolling unstoppably towards the screen. 'Exterminate! EXTERMINATE! EX-TER-MIN-A-A-A-A-T-E!'

Closing music, dramatic, orchestral, credits sliding by in front of a rushing time vortex.

Continuity Announcer: 'The Doctor will return in two weeks time. Next on BBC1, *Celebrity Fame Academy* – can Jonathan survive another round?'

Music swirls, reaches a crescendo, names rushing by, and suddenly, out of nowhere, light fills the screen: WOOOAARRRRR.... POOOOOM!

RECORDING ENDS

Dial 'M' For Metaphysics

Simon Bucher-Jones

To the memory of Craig Hinton who never mistook supraspacial for supraserious...

The drums roll, and the credits thunder.

∞

Outside the ordered realms, in the impossible latitudes where the chronovores swim like mer-folk between reefs of jagged fossilised certainty, there is neither death nor decay: as a rule. Nor are there police procedurals or trials. Until now.

∞

- Question? How can there be death in the realms of chaos? Is not death a transition from a definite impermanent state (life) to a definite permanent state (death)? Is it not the case that no state in that realm is permanent and thus q.e.d. no death is possible?

- Answer! It is accepted that in a billion billion billion cycles the subquarks and penta-ki-mesonic structure of the victim may by sheer randomness recombine and display again the emergent property of 'life', yet this does not prevent the victim being presently dead nor there being in connection with that death a case of murder to answer.

∞

It was the explorer Qualifr (self-penned scribe of the eponymous travels): that inveterate quibbler and poker into unexpected orifices who found the body. A mere ten thousand light years in length, it had avoided detection for sometime among the macroscopic expanses of the Conceptual Rifts.

Once found, the corpse of the demi-god, Kronos, then, was something of an embarrassment to all. He/She had been missed, momentarily, by his/her peers, but it had been assumed that Kronos had just taken a little longer than usual to choose a sufficiently gorgeous embodiment for the forthcoming Tri-Junction Of The Quintillion Spheres, and

would be 'down' in a moment.

For the equivalent of a million years the corpse lay, rotting, across the narrow confines of the Earth timeline five-fold by-pass, sending a quintillion score pataphysical paraforms a six-fold billennia out of their way. Eventually not even the glacial indifference of the Higher Powers could stand the constant bickering and complaints of those diverted minnows of space and time, nor, if tasked to reveal themselves truly, the stench of the seven-dimensional effluvia from the corpus.

∞

There was only one thing to do. Send for an investigator. Someone from the realms of space and time, of greed and self-interest, where such events as MURDER were both possible, and commonplace.

Opinion differed. The Eternals were for seconding someone from the Land of Fiction, one of the great Classical Detectives. The Chronovores – holding themselves the injured parties – were for hauling in one of the heroic archetypes of reality, those figures who, while beginning within what is laughably termed 'actuality' by the hoi polloi soon transcend their common origins by the plethora of myths and legendry they give rise to, across the whole panoply of the over-continua. The Mythoi, lurking on the fringes of the discussion, all too aware of their possible status as suspects, affected indifference to the point in fine, while making clear their utter refusal to continence any investigation by any of the powers pledged via nature and nurture to their destruction.

'Let's have no Elder Gods invited here,' they seethed, 'their minds are long made up, and do not change. They'll pin it on a brutha, soon as once, a mark is seen upon the corpse which could – in a bad light of burning evil suns – be misconstrued as mark of tentacle.'

∞

Many of the Mythoi spoke blank verse, to the annoyance of their peers, who considered it affected, but even so they had the power (the hideous armies of the one masked behind the guise of Thoth, the writhing pustular servitors of the trans-oceanic gulfs, any amount of lawyers) to make their feelings stick.

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Consequently it was no shining Elder God, no Great Detective, Elderly Spinster, Plump

Belgian Expatriate, nor Humble Parish Priest who found him or herself pulled out of fiction or space-time to tread upon the broader (if flimsier) dark matter boards of Murder's theatre of the mind. It was – so the fetchers guaranteed – a spoon playing fool, a brain-addled mangler of axioms and aphorisms, a Time Lord fresh embodied in a guise as harmless as it was seemingly inept.'

Qualifr wrote privately in his *travels* (intended for transcription and omni casting across the metaweb at a later date, but meta-presently only in sketched in draft form) that '*the bringing in of such a one as investigator could hint at nothing less than a wholesale desire to hush the matter up and lay it to rest with all expedience.'*

The medical reports (Cosmological Scene Investigation) produced with some outbreaks of madness by the force-drafted Professor Frankenstein, the Doctors Phibes and West, a good dozen of Kimball Kinnison's high-tension-thinkers and the staff of Sector General made it quite clear that Kronos had been stunned by a single projectile, a small body, roughly twenty times the mass of earth's sun impacting the left, left, hyperlobe, and sending his/her spurules into spasm during a crucial ambroplexation.

Trauma induced ambroplexic chronoclasms ruptured the demi-god's bi-lateral chronoflotation organs, bringing it down, becalmed and doldrummed on the hard and jagged time-reefs. Concussed and panicking it had writhed across the 19th and 20th centuries, abrading itself on major wars, impaling itself on suffering, engulfing the germs of the great pandemics. It had not been a quick death.

One thing puzzled the medical opinions of the best doctors of a thousand fictional venues, from Kronos' forehead a great world-spanning tree had sprung. The best diagnosis they could put on that, was 'mythic', that and 'nice apples.'

∞

The Doctor wasn't quite as expected. No spoons, and his demeanour seemed less frantic and less mad. More melancholic than manic, he shuffled around the suspects rubbing his hair with his right hand nervously for some unfathomable 'ephemeral' reason. His torso was riddled with bullet wounds which outside of his native space-time neither pained him nor healed. He managed to pass these off as a 'fashion statement' or 'armistice poppies' but only the most dimensionally naïve believed him.

Nevertheless he threw himself into the investigation, barging in on the Tri-Junction of the Quintillion Spheres, demanding access to the Sealed Nebulas Of Ne-Jebulon Of The Sixteen Hells, taking fingerprints from Nineteen Handed Sek, and insulting Old Ones, Eternals, Kronos-chronovore-descendants-in-metalaw, and passing Conceptual Entities ('You're 'The Thought That Counts?' and where were you on Quillion Sphere Eve? Oh I

see, 'you 'meant' to go to a charity do. But you didn't? Any witnesses to you staying home?') with equal aplomb.

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He backed Amboloth, Render Of Worlds into an ill-angled corner, head cocked slightly, his hand raised to his brow as if struck with a sudden thought, and struggling within himself at its banality. 'Just one more thing,'

'Yzzzz,' Amoboloth: Render Of Worlds hizzed, 'Wht ez ut neow? Wwwwe hz told u r mvmnts whn krunus wuz zlain, whut elze ez thure?'

Whutelze indeed? A week into the case, with, no results and his bullet-wounds starting to twinge as somewhere in the cogs and ratchets of eternity the connection with real-time clicked on an inexorable notch, the seventh Doctor was getting fidgety and feisty and thoroughly fecked off. He'd been given a tiny office (a broom closet of a thing roughly nine parsecs by two by twelve by seven by three) and a secretary, a Dark Young Of Shub-Niggurath who spent the whole time grumbling about political appointees and lack of positive discrimination, and playing CDs of *The Darkest Of The Hillside Thickets* backwards.

A black-edged card landed in his in tray. White diamond lettering on compressed space. 'Xsplks and Uispl, Celestial Toymakers'. They claimed to have a lead.

∞

'We bought him out,' Xsplks said, 'but he's never accepted it, and I reckon he's slipped one of these to someone with a grudge.

'It'll be a right laugh when we've got the bugs out,' Uispl interjected, 'but if he did use the prototype that went missing from our Ultra Hyper Fun Joke Factory, we can prove it was the murder weapon.'

'It gives it a spin, see.'

'Can't iron it out.'

'Who wants a solar catapult that spins your sun. Makes it a reet bugger to aim.'

The Doctor looked thoughtful, 'So you're saying that if this was the murder weapon, the projectile impact would show signs of angular rotation.'

'Right!'

'But also that it might not have been intended as a murderous shot, if the aim was so difficult.'

'Maybe, we don't know. That's not for us to say, but if this does prove to be the result of a Xsplk and Uispl 'littel sure-shot solarpult' we want our names kept out of

it. It's the Entity-formerly-known-as-The-Celestial-Toymaker you want, the Guardian Of Dreams, The Old Sour Mandarin himself.'

∞

'Ah, Doctor. I knew your investigation would bring you to me. A hand of cards to enliven the discussion? No, ah well maybe another time. I admit I had a wager with Kronos that went awry. I felt no particular need to unburden myself of this hitherto, but as – you – ask, my old friend and adversary. It was simplicity itself. Kronos bet me I could not shoot an apple off his head, and I'm afraid the clumsily constructed solarpult of those newcomers Xsplks and Uispl proved sadly warped. I have their contract here for the use of My Former Nomenclature, by the way. You'll notice that here in the nth-most line of the small print, they compact to permit me free access to all toys, either prototype or complete for the purposes of games, tests, trails or other contests of skill or chance. Oh dear, those poor little imps. Under celestial law they're responsible for the fatal results of their spin, Doctor.'

'Too obvious,' the Doctor slammed his fist down on the desk-top, raising a fractal queep from one of the baryonoscopic civilisations eking out a meagre living in the coffee stains, 'and too soon for a punch line at that.' He scowled at the Demon's barely oriental face. It seemed to have come into this world but half-made up, part jobbing actor, part malicious story. 'You want to be accused so you can pass the blame to Xsplks and Uispl, and get back your title, but I'm not falling for it.' He hesitated, 'mind you if you wanted to tell me who else might have access to a solarpult.'

'Or an apple for the Doctor?'

'Its apple for the Teacher, apples keep Doctors away. Beside you'd need a corkscrew.'

'What?'

'Well, it would take some doing to make a twirly, curly, spinning path through a brain the size of a solar system. You'd be very lucky to do it with one shot of a solarpult; you'd need more spin than just the effect of a faulty toy. And then there's this tree. If Kronos was balancing an apple on his/her head, and frankly I can't see someone in all his/her Quillion Eve Finery stooping to the delights of the William Tell Experience in the dark shadow matter coolth, just beyond the scarlet carpet of hell-stars the rim the entrance to the Guild of Chronovores, what strange wash of accelerated time took that apple and budded and rooted and tunnelled and burst forth into this forehead tree. No mere solarpult could do that.'

'Bah.' The Mandarin sulked in his silky robes, peeved that his scheme hadn't

brought him a day in court at Xsplk and Uispl's expense. 'I'll help you, Doctor, but only if you play a game with me.'

'Oh, very well. What'll it be? Tesseractic chess played on the surfaces of a hypercube? A lethal game of shove-ha'penny? Ping Pong?'

The Mandarin hastily shoved the bats back in his ornate desk's left drawer. Their wings beat inside it like black leather castanets

'Nothing so simple, Doctor. My game is this. A harmless pub-quiz question'. A pasteboard card flashed in his hand, and he leered triumphantly. 'Name all the people to have played The Doctor.'

The Doctor staggered. So simple and yet so fiendish, the Mandarin Formerly Known As The Toymaker had drawn on the evil powers and forces of The Land Of Fiction, threatening to turn him into a story, and worse. The simple storification he could weather, here, outside of time, find a way back to reality at the end of his investigations, but if he answered correctly he would not merely turn into a story but into a completed one, for how could he name all the people to have played the Doctor, here outside of space and time, without ending all the future possibilities of his own life? And if he answered incorrectly, he would be the Mandarin's plaything for eternity.

∞

Three days later the Doctor was still listing actors and the Mandarin nails had dug long tapered furrows into the desk top. 'I refuse to believe this infinite digression, all must know your ephemeral kind have but thirteen brief lives,' he screeched, 'the game is forfeit.'

'Really?' The Doctor fixed the Mandarin in the eye, with a Wedding-Guest stopping gaze that any ancient albatross pendant wearing mariner would have been proud of. 'I rather think you've forgotten fanfic.'

The Mandarin rubbed his weary eyes with one yellow pancake make-upped hand, leaving a white smear across his face. 'Oh, just get out. And for what its worth, you need to see Tisiphone, may she give you the satisfaction of a dead dog in a ditch.'

The Doctor fluttered a hand, pointedly across his bullet holes. 'It's not much of a threat, Mandy, is it?' He paused at the door for a second on his way out of the Entity-formerly-known-as-The-Celestial-Toymaker's lair, but it wasn't because he'd thought of anything else to ask, he just wanted to watch the Mandarin seethe in his kaftan.

∞

As the hollow ringing of the great ghost bells sounded, like trebles peeling in the towers of

a drowned cathedral in a poem by Swinburne, the Doctor straightened his hat, and brushed dried blood off his jacket. It would never do, to not look his best.

∞

'Come in,' a tremulous voice called.

Tisiphone looked like an old lady. Knitting in her lap, a pug dog at her feet, her hair pulled back into a grey bun. Sitting in the lobby of 'The Kindly Ladies Detective Agency' on a dull grey asteroid, in orbit around an ancient ruin of a gas giant: the whole real space thing, sticking into the metaphysical realms like a sore thumb in a door-jamb.

'The first thing I should have asked myself,' the Doctor said, 'was who might have wanted Kronos dead. In Greek mythology, he attempted the murder of Uranus his father, castrating him with a scythe to prevent his siring more sons, and from the blood of that celestial wound sprang the Erinyes, the furies, Goddesses of Vengeance, the vindicators of blood. But I suppose you can't believe everything you hear?'

'The Greeks,' Tisiphone said, sniffily, 'weren't the most reliable witnesses to transdimensional interactions. For a start they mistook a voluntary operation for an attack.'

The Doctor raised an eyebrow.

'I don't see how I can be plainer. Uranus didn't want any more children, nasty mewling little things scarcely a hundred thousand miles across, always getting under foot. So he asked Kronos to perform a vasectomy: well, strictly, a metatesseractical-wormhole compaction of a crucial node. There was nothing untoward about it. But let some ancient Greek soothsayers see a giant hyperspatial blade lopping bit off a God's nethers and they start crossing their legs and wincing. Next thing you know Kronos gets tried by the media.'

'So there's nothing at all to the legends that you and your two sisters hated Kronos and would have done anything to destroy him?'

'Nothing at all, Doctor.' The voice was male, smooth and sardonic and positioned exactly behind the Doctor's head. Inevitable as an imbecile in a novel by Wilkie Collins.

The Doctor swivelled in a motion that in ordinary 3-space would have given him whiplash of the hat at the very least, his paisley waist-coat practically orbiting his torso as he moved...

'Master!'

The man in black bowed. His beard, freshly oiled and glittering, his velvet never darker or more plush, the silver filigree at his neck a fine tracery of starshine.

The Doctor's eyes narrowed. 'Aren't you dead?'

'Yes and no.'

'And what sort of tomfool answer do you call that?'

'A technically accurate one?'

'I suppose you aren't here to confess.'

'Not exactly. As at your last trial, I think I can be regarded as more of an expert witness.'

'As at my last trial?'

'Oh, you haven't heard? Hmm, I see. Ah, my dear Doctor you have been deceived. A warrant is issued for your arrest. For the murder of Kronos through the application of an illicit Time-Spiral. "Time is the weapon of the Time Lords.". That's what they'll say first, and they'll raise your past encounters with Kronos.'

'Surely, that all applies as certainly to you,' the Doctor grumbled, dunking a fragile rich tea biscuit in his rich tea. 'I can't believe someone's trying to frame me. That case is as flimsy as, as flimsy as, as, this biscuit.' It sank with a sagging plop. 'Nor that if they are about to try to pin this one on me, that you would want to forestall them.'

'They've traced the world-line of the tree in Kronos's head back to the apple your fifth incarnation bit on Deva Loka, it bears unmistakable traces of your biodata.'

'So they should arrest the apple.'

'Being a fruit is not a crime here.'

'But past possession of one is?'

'If it's found sticking out of the brain-pan of a prominent metaphysical personage, yes!'

'It's still circumstantial.'

'That will be a great comfort to you, I'm sure, in the Death Oubliettes of the Forgotten Zone.'

The Doctor perked up momentarily. 'Where's that?'

'I've forgotten,' the Master sighed.

'Well, there's only one thing to do,' the Doctor finished his tea, and stood up, 'if I'm to be the scapegoat for the death of Kronos. I'd better get to the Court.'

∞

The court had been, as is traditional in these cases, hammered out of a standard sized spiral galaxy. A bit cramped for all the interested parties, but no doubt the sightseers and the hyperjournalists would leave part way through. The Judge was a hyper conglomerate of Justice Machines from a number of interested cultures, the Defendant a thing, and the Prosecutor an abomination.

The Doctor spoke brilliantly – and, surprisingly, the Master backed him – but to all things and to all heroes, there are fates that cannot be avoided, only met.

Convicted, the Doctor smiled as the time-winds took him back to die, as the Toymaker had cursed, like a dog in a ditch in old San Francisco.

'I suppose,' his voice faded, 'in the final analysis, all the Murderer and I were doing was killing time, before the end. But you might want to look again at the new Toymakers' catapults; see if one's been flipped into anti-matter firing anti-suns with corkscrew twirling positrons.'

At the back of the Court-galaxy, Omega made a run for it, dripping fifth Doctor's biodata from his stolen body.

EMMA VIECELI 2008

One Perfect Twilight

Craig Hinton

'Why not? After all, that's how it all started,' said the Doctor breathlessly, grinning at his two companions, pleased to see that they too were in on the joke. Smiling came easily to his fifth incarnation, but there was meaning in this grin – real meaning. For the first time in ages – perhaps the first time since he had awoken into his new life at the base of the Pharos radio telescope – he felt comfortable, secure... happy with his latest regeneration.

Not without good reason. The machinations of the Guardians of Time were behind him, and he had triumphed. He no longer felt like a puppet of the Time Lords – a combination of their current disorganisation and the recent removal of his TARDIS's recall device had seen to that. But the real reason had more to do with meeting three of his previous incarnations. Since his rebirth in this latest body he had felt a certain… insecurity. His other selves had all commanded respect, but the Doctor had found that lacking in this younger form. The weight of his experience was being belied by misleading appearances, and even the Doctor's patience wasn't infinite. Before arriving on Gallifrey, he had almost been on the point of considering this incarnation to be a write-off, and for a Time Lord, that could only have one logical conclusion…

But to meet his other selves, to be considered an equal, to be treated with respect by the First Doctor, the youngest and yet the oldest, the one that they all deferred to…

The Doctor *finally* felt like *the Doctor*. Even though his regeneration had happened some time ago, it was almost as if it had happened again… another rebirth. And not just for him. Even the TARDIS felt new, full of promise in a way that it hadn't felt for a very very long time. He looked around at the pristine white-panelled, roundelled walls, seeing the interior of his TARDIS as if for the first time, cherishing its dimensionally transcendental interior, proud of its abilities. Abilities that he was definitely going to need. He may have won the latest battle with the Guardians, but once more he was on the run from the Time Lords; once more with only the TARDIS and his wits to keep him one step ahead. Just the way that he liked it.

He strode past Tegan and Turlough, his beige trailing behind him like a cloak, and busied himself at the hexagonal console, occasionally glancing up at the central column of the Time Rotor, its rise and fall signalling their departure from Gallifrey. Everything was running smoothly… but the Doctor would have been worried if it hadn't. Because Time Lords weren't the only ones who could regenerate.

Recent events in the far future of the galaxy had almost destroyed his precious ship, as the forces of time itself had virtually torn the vessel apart. The Doctor's smile momentarily left him as he cast his mind back, remembering as he had watched helplessly as his TARDIS had suffered in the lonely depths of the Time Vortex, its pain reaching across eternity and infinity like a knife in his hearts. His first sight of the Ship after it had finally escaped its fate had frozen him to the core: the console room had no longer existed: just a default void. The interior dimensions were in chaos: some had collapsed, some were growing out of control. Destruction – painful, agonising destruction – was everywhere. For any other vehicle, it would have been the end.

But TARDISes were far more than just machines: they were living, thinking expressions of pure mathematics, the secret science of block transfer computation, mastered by the Time Lords. They were equations writ large, and equations could be solved, theorems could be proved, functions could be integrated and differentiated. During the short rest that they had all enjoyed on the Eye of Orion, the TARDIS had woven webs and lattices of solid mathematics throughout its mortally damaged structure, its titanic calculating engines rebuilding, recreating… Indeed, that rest had been as much for the TARDIS's benefit as it had been for the Doctor, Tegan and Turlough. Even though their holiday had been cut short, they had all needed the break. His smile returned as he thought about his young friends, the TARDIS crew. The four of them had been through a lot together –

Four? The Doctor frowned and started to count.

The Doctor, Tegan, Turlough and… Turlough, Tegan, the Doctor and… He shook his head. There were three of them, not four. For a second, he was puzzled. Then that puzzlement turned to the faintest chill of fear: wasn't this exactly the same as what had happened on Castrovalva, when the Master had hidden Adric's existence from him through their Time Lord telepathic link? But it wasn't the Master: the Doctor couldn't detect his characteristic taint. No, this was more subtle, without any traces of malice. If anything, it was defensive rather than offensive. But that was irrelevant. No one tampered with the Doctor's mind without his permission.

His frown deepened as he looked up, but he wasn't focussing on anything in particular: he was simply trying to determine the parameters of the missing piece of his memory. There was something simply not there… something that just didn't add up. *Three – or four? Three – or four?* He could see the worried expression on Tegan's face, but he ignored it, trying to concentrate, trying to remember what he had forgotten…

Perhaps I'm imagining it, he suddenly wondered. *Perhaps it's nothing more than the strain of the last few days*… No. Someone was *trying* to make him forget – and they had just redoubled their efforts. So, they were aware of his discovery. There was a hole in his mind, an area that something – someone – was attempting to hide from him using quite advanced

psionic techniques.

They weren't going to succeed. Too many life forms had tried to manipulate his mind over the centuries, and the Doctor hadn't survived up till now without learning a few tricks of his own. Marshalling the considerable telepathic gifts that were his Time Lord birthright and armed with offensive techniques learnt on a thousand worlds, the Doctor found the barrier that had been erected in his mind, tested it for its strengths and its weaknesses. And then he struck.

He visualised a brick wall that could be broken down, psychic brick by psychic brick. And his mind was a pick axe.

He saw a door with a keyhole. And his mind was the key.

He sensed a force field woven from gravitons. And his mind was a particle cannon.

Axe, key and cannon struck as one, hitting the barrier with the might of a Time Lord mind reinforced by centuries of training. The Doctor felt the barrier begin to give, before he sensed his mysterious assailant attempting to reconfigure the barrier… but to no avail. They were fighting in the Doctor's mind, and it was familiar territory – for the Doctor. The barrier held for the merest microsecond before the Doctor shattered it, finally revealing the truth. A very obvious truth.

With a sigh, the Doctor leant heavily on the console. He realised that a concerned Tegan was at his side; even though the entire affair had only taken a fraction of a second, the others must have noticed the strain on the Doctor's face.

'Doc? Are you okay?' she asked.

He nodded. 'I am now. But it would have been very unfortunate for us all if I had forgotten how to count.'

Ignoring Tegan and Turlough's puzzled looks, he strode out of the console room, his emotions a mixture of concern and anger.

Because the TARDIS wasn't the only sentient block transformation in the vicinity.

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It took the Doctor far too much time to reach the corridor of the TARDIS that he was after. Although he and the Ship had taken the opportunity to redesign the console room, they had jointly decided to rebuild the rest of the TARDIS just as it had been. Even so, the Doctor wasn't entirely sure that everything was back to exactly how it had been originally. He suspected that the TARDIS had been taking liberties, and the Doctor wasn't entirely sure that this was the right room. He wasn't even sure that it was the right corridor.

That's the problem with infinite living machines, he mused as he reached what he hoped was the correct doorway. *Infinite memories but infinite imaginations.*

As he went to knock on the roundelled door, he felt a sudden compulsion to keep walking. *Why bother? Why not visit another part of the TARDIS?* But this self-doubt was nothing more than a half-hearted attempt to keep him out, a pale shadow of the defensive barrier that he had encountered earlier. And nowhere near strong enough to dissuade an angry Time Lord. He knocked.

'Can I come in? It's me. The –'

'The Doctor,' came a familiar voice. A very familiar voice. 'Please – come in.'

The Doctor pushed open the door and entered the room, now knowing what – or rather, who – he was going to see. He wasn't disappointed.

The room itself was configured to the dimensions of all of the crew bedrooms: reasonably large, with a bed, dressing table and desk. But whereas Tegan and Turlough had personalised their rooms with personal items, this room was completely blank, a template waiting for an identity.

Rather like its occupant, even though that occupant currently looked like the Doctor's mirror image, blond-haired, in striped trousers, cricketing jumper and frockcoat, standing next to the unused bed. It didn't faze the Doctor for a second.

'Perhaps you'd like to explain exactly what you think you're playing at?' the Doctor – the real Doctor – snapped. 'I don't take kindly to my mind being invaded. And while you're at it, I'd appreciate your taking a different form, Kamelion.'

A whirling vortex of blue light consumed the figure, burning off the Doctor's image and replacing it with… something else. A robot, with dull silver skin, articulated joints, and a transparent brain-pan revealing simplistic circuitry.

'Is this more acceptable, Doctor?' The voice was now rich and fruity, an incongruous sound from the silver figure that now stood opposite.

'It'll do,' he sighed. Kamelion was no more a robot that the Doctor was, but the primitive form was apparently some kind of default appearance, programmed in by one of Kamelion's previous masters. 'Now, why were you trying to hide from me?'

'I thought it would be easier for you to forget about my existence,' said Kamelion sadly. 'As I tried to explain to you, I believe myself to be a liability. My very design parameters make me susceptible to mental control. As an active member of the TARDIS crew, I would constantly be exposed to such control. As such, I would endanger you, Tegan and Turlough.'

'Oh, Kamelion, Kamelion, Kamelion,' said the Doctor, sitting heavily on the bed. He couldn't help but feel sorry for the construct. 'I thought we'd been through all of this.' Now, with Kamelion's mental interference removed, the Doctor could remember the

conversation perfectly. Kamelion, tortured with self-doubt after being under the mental control of master criminal Maximillian Arrestis, had vanished off into the depths of the TARDIS, claiming that his disappearance would be best for all of them. And then, some time between that moment and the TARDIS's arrival on the Eye of Orion, Kamelion's formidable psychic powers had quite literally allowed him to disappear, all memories of him simply fading away. Had the Doctor not been a Time Lord, Kamelion could have remained that way indefinitely, wandering the infinite corridors of the TARDIS like some tragic myth. *The Wandering Shapeshifter*.

'Discussion or no discussion, you cannot argue my logic, Doctor,' Kamelion protested. 'I will give you an example of the risk I pose, if I may?'

The Doctor shrugged his shoulders. Now he could remember how long-winded Kamelion could be, but there wasn't really much choice: he was determined to get to the bottom of this, to make Kamelion understand that he could be a valued member of the TARDIS crew. There was something about Kamelion, a vulnerability, that the Doctor found appealing. 'Go on,' he said.

'Although I stayed within the TARDIS, I was able to monitor the events on your home planet via the TARDIS's own sensors.'

This didn't surprise the Doctor: as a shaft-shifting block transfer computation, Kamelion wasn't that dissimilar to the TARDIS. Indeed, the TARDIS had probably valued the company – knowing the other TARDISes on Gallifrey, they'd probably been too stuck-up to talk to the Doctor's. But there was something slightly disconcerting about the idea of an invisible passenger communing with the TARDIS. What else could Kamelion do?

'At their height, the Time Lords of Gallifrey were one of the most powerful races of mentalists in the galaxy,' Kamelion continued. 'Although the passage of time and the decay of their society has dulled their abilities, they are still formidable.'

The Doctor didn't know whether to be more upset by Kamelion's casual dismissal of his race, or the inference that the Doctor was no longer a Time Lord. But he let Kamelion carry on.

'Had I stepped out of the temporal grace field of the TARDIS, any single Time Lord could have assumed control of me.' The temporal grace field was a side effect of the TARDIS being a separate set of dimensions from the real world: one of its benefits was that it disrupted all but the most intense psionic attacks.

Even so, the Doctor didn't like what he was hearing. "But we're talking about the Time Lords, for goodness' sake!" he said in exasperation. They – *we* – are hardly going to use you as a weapon of war, are we?' But the Doctor knew that he was on dodgy ground. Kamelion's next words confirmed that.

'Really?' Kamelion raised a metallic eyebrow. 'What about the Master? He has

already demonstrated his intentions towards me. Or your own President, unbalanced, his mental powers boosted by ancient technology? Or Rassilon, your founder, far more than just a Time Lord? Any one of them could have taken complete control of me and used me for their own purposes.'

The Doctor had to admit that Kamelion had a point. The Master had used Kamelion to escape his exile on the distant world of Xeriphas, before taking advantage of his shape-changing powers to alter the course of human history. Borusa – poor Borusa – had been completely unhinged at the end, and as for Rassilon… even the combined presence of four Doctors couldn't have stood up against the man who had founded the Time Lord race.

'Any sufficiently telepathic race could override my personality matrix and use me to their own ends, Doctor. And as you know, the galaxy is teeming with telepathic life.'

Telepathy: it seemed to be the ultimate evolutionary step. The Osirans, the Nestene Consciousness, the Great Intelligence, the Sensorites, the Mentiads… even the Cyberlords of the eleventh millennium had been equipped with cyber-psionic circuitry. Kamelion certainly had a point.

'Kamelion: what do you really want?' said the Doctor softly.

'I want to be free, Doctor. I want my independence, I want to know what it is like to be truly alive, rather than someone else's puppet.'

The Doctor ran a hand through his long blond hair. He knew exactly what Kamelion meant. His exile on Earth, and his subsequent "career" as an unwilling agent of the Time Lords, had been one of the least fondly remembered period of his lives. If only there was something that he could do for Kamelion… With a sudden realisation, he slapped his forehead.

'Prince of fools! Of course!'

'Doctor?'

'What if I could guarantee that no-one would ever take you over again?' he said quickly. 'What if there was some way to render you immune to telepathic take-over?' The Doctor had had an idea. It would need some research, and a fair bit of inventiveness, but there might just be a way…

Kamelion looked at him quizzically – or as quizzically as his metallic face could manage. 'You have thought of something?'

The Doctor jumped from the bed. 'Possibly, possibly. But the time has come for complete honesty between us, Kamelion. I need to know the truth.'

'I do not believe that I have lied to you,' Kamelion replied, a trace of hurt in his rich voice. For an overgrown equation, he was extremely sensitive.

'That's not what I meant,' said the Doctor patiently. 'All I know about you is that

you're some sort of block transfer computation, like the TARDIS in many ways. But that's all I know. I need to know everything!'

'I *would* not lie to you, Doctor,' Kamelion insisted. 'What do you want to know?'

The Doctor grabbed Kamelion by the shoulders, and leant his face forward so that it was inches away from Kamelion's. 'Everything! Everything and anything! Your life story, Kamelion.'

'That is a simple matter to explain, Doctor. I was constructed in the galactic year –'

The Doctor shook his head. 'Not here, Kamelion. If I'm to help you, I need to record all of this.' He gestured towards the door. 'If you'll come with me?'

Kamelion started to walk towards the door, before stopping. 'Do you really think that you can give me my freedom?' he asked quietly.

'I… I think so,' the Doctor replied. 'At the very least, I'm going to do everything I can.'

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'It feels like we are descending,' said Kamelion as they walked down yet another corridor, with white walls and roundels. He had visited many parts of the TARDIS – the Console Room, the library, the Cloisters, even the power room, with its huge dynamorphic generators reaching from the floor to the vaulted ceiling – but all of this was unfamiliar. The lighting was significantly dimmer than it had been, and there was a sense of pressure, as if they were deep inside the TARDIS. And yet every corridor they had walked down had been perfectly level.

'In a manner of speaking, we are,' the Doctor agreed. 'We've passed five dimensional junctures so far. Each one brings us closer to what you could call the heart of the TARDIS, where the multiple dimensions are at balance point. Because of that, the dimensional pressure gets greater the closer you get.' Kamelion could sense that the Doctor was pleased to have an intellectual equal to converse with on such matters. But Kamelion was still puzzled.

'I would have thought that the power room was the heart of the TARDIS.' It was where the voice of the TARDIS had been strongest to Kamelion, and Kamelion had, quite logically, assumed that the TARDIS's "soul", for want of a better word, would be close to its power source.

The Doctor smiled. 'A common misconception. The power room is nothing more than a glorified secondary control room. Where we're going… well, you can see for yourself. We're almost there.'

Turning into another corridor, the lighting dimmed even further, the pressure

increased once more, and Kamelion actually felt the transition between conditional pathways. The TARDIS was a collection of different dimensions – the conditional pathways – but they all had to meet somewhere: such was the physics of temporal engineering. At the heart of the TARDIS, all of the pathways combined, forming the prime dimension of the TARDIS, the seed from which the entire vessel had grown. Once, it had been Time And Relative *Dimension* in Space. Now, centuries later, after the prime dimension had bred and pupped, it was Time And Relative Dimension*s* In Space. But the prime dimension, the original, you might say, was still there. Just ahead.

About a minute later, the two of them reached a huge door of some golden metal, incongruously set into the white wall. Instead of the familiar roundels, the door was embossed with a large circle containing a pattern that Kamelion found familiar. Although it wasn't common inside the TARDIS, Kamelion had seen it very recently: it was the Seal of the Prydonian Chapter of the Time Lords of Gallifrey. The Doctor's family crest, as it were.

'Welcome to the very heart of the TARDIS, Kamelion,' announced the Doctor, gently pushing the door at the centre of the seal. Soundlessly, it opened onto blackness. 'I'll go in first,' he whispered. 'Don't want to give the old girl a shock – she's a bit shy.' He walked into the darkness and was immediately swallowed.

A couple of seconds later, Kamelion followed the Doctor inside. He had expected darkness, but there was none: the room was well lit, but with no obvious light sources. Nor was there any pressure: Kamelion suspected that the pressure was due to the pathways overlapping: here, they were one. The overriding feeling was one of calm, of peace, of oneness. Basking in this unfamiliar feeling, Kamelion looked around… and was shocked. He had thought that the power room, with its gargantuan engines, had been impressive, but this…

They were standing in the centre of a vast dome, at least five hundred feet across. The distant walls were in darkness and too far away to see, but the ceiling, equally high above them, was well-lit. It was covered in exquisite carvings which Kamelion guessed depicted the history of Gallifrey: there was a bas relief of a huge fleet of spike-nosed starships attacking bat-like creatures; a space station in orbit around an exploding star; a planet exploding while the Time Lords looked on helplessly. Kamelion recognised these events from his knowledge of the Time Lords: the Great Vampires, Omega's triumph and the tragedy of Minyos. But there were other images that puzzled him: Rassilon and Omega standing on either side of an unfamiliar figure; Rassilon being led away in chains by Chancellery guards… events from Time Lord history that the TARDIS had seen fit to hide from him.

'What is this place?' he asked.

The Doctor threw out his arms. 'The very core of the TARDIS. Its heart and mind. To your left is the Eye of Harmony,' the Doctor continued. Kamelion followed the Doctor's gesture. About fifty feet away from them, the Eye was a large raised square on the floor, about twenty feet on each side, apparently made of crumbling brickwork. At the centre was a stylised domed eye. Kamelion couldn't help thinking that it was looking at him.

'I thought the Eye of Harmony was the power source of the Time Lords,' he commented. He had been told of the Eye by the TARDIS – both the Doctor's and the Master's TARDISes – themselves: a naked singularity, the remnants of the black hole tamed by Omega at the dawn of Time Lord civilisation, its gravitational pull balanced by the very mass of the planet Gallifrey itself. So, what was this?

'And so it is,' agreed the Doctor, stepping over to the Eye and grabbing one of the four poles that marked each corner. 'This is a block transfer computation which links directly to the original Eye. The power for the TARDIS is beamed through the Vortex, received here, and stored and utilised through the power room.'

Kamelion cocked his head. 'I detect… I detect intelligence,' he said with surprise. 'But it is nothing like the intelligence I have been talking to.'

The Doctor laughed. 'Well, it wouldn't be. The TARDIS is a mixture of highly advanced exitonic circuitry – the most advanced AIs in existence – and block transfer computations. You've been talking to a shadow of the TARDIS, its subconscious. This –' he gestured around him, 'is the real thing.' He leaned forward. 'The old girl isn't very talkative.'

'And this?' The other object of note in the vast chamber was an assembly of brass and crystal that filled the right-hand side. A complex yet random network of cables and rods, it glittered and sparkled with inner light. Although there didn't appear to be any pattern to the arrangement of the components, there was a natural beauty about it, as if it was a living machine.

As Kamelion watched, a spark of white light formed at the base and shot through the rods and cables before being swallowed by the uppermost part of the machine.

'Ah – this is the reason why we're here,' said the Doctor, trotting over to the base of the assembly and stroking the crystal and brass. 'As you know, the TARDIS is built from block transfer computations. The secret science created by the Logopolitans and appropriated by the Time Lords hundreds of millennia ago, it is a method of modelling the real world through pure mathematics.'

'A perfect description of myself,' said Kamelion. 'Nothing more than a mathematical equation with delusions of grandeur.'

The Doctor ran up to Kamelion and grabbed him by his upper arms. 'Don't sell

yourself short, Kamelion!' he said breathlessly. 'Block transfer computation is one of the most advanced sciences in the known universe! Thanks to its power, the TARDIS is a living, thinking being – and so are you.'

Kamelion nodded, albeit reluctantly. 'The point is taken, Doctor. But what is this device?'

'The Combinatorix Engine,' said the Doctor proudly. 'It generates the mathematics which form the TARDIS. Everything derives from the Engine.' He stroked one of the crystal columns. 'Powered by the Eye of Harmony, it constantly calculates and recalculates the mathematical parameters which define the physical structure of the TARDIS. You're familiar with a lot of Time Lord technology: consider it to be a cut-down version of the Matrix.'

Kamelion had heard of the Matrix: the repository of all Time Lord knowledge. 'So how will this help me?' he asked.

'In order to solve your problems, I need to know exactly what you are. Calculating or interpreting block transfer computations is a little bit beyond me, but for the Combinatorix Engine…'

Kamelion took an involuntary step backwards. 'There is a high probability that this device could terminate my very existence, Doctor,' he said in a worried tone. Kamelion was well aware of his own capabilities, but the computational power of the Engine could easily disrupt him, reduce him to a random set of insoluble linear equations which would dissipate into the void. Not a pleasant prospect.

The Doctor's expression was concerned, worried. 'No, no, no, Kamelion. Why would I put you at risk? All I want you to do is to visualise your entire life. The Engine will interpret this, and give me an analysis of the exact type of computations which make up your being. From that… well, I hope that I'll be able to solve your little problem.'

Kamelion hesitated for a moment. He had no reason to suspect that the Doctor meant him any harm: the surface of the Doctor's mind told Kamelion that his well-being, and the answer to his problem, were all that mattered at the moment. Putting aside his doubts, he stepped forward.

'Very well, I agree. What form do you want me to assume to interface with the Engine?' With his abilities, he could quite easily connect to any form of machinery.

'Nothing so complicated, Kamelion. Just hold my hand and think back to your origin,' said the Doctor. 'I'll act as the conduit between the Combinatorix Engine and yourself.' He gave a reassuring smile. 'Don't worry – everything will be all right.' He held out his hand. The other hand grasped one of the brass rods of the Engine. 'Ready?'

Kamelion took the Doctor's hand. 'I am ready, Doctor,' he confirmed. 'At least, as ready as I will ever be.'

The Doctor's voice was quiet. 'Then cast your mind back, Kamelion. Right back to the very beginning.'

For the first few seconds, nothing happened. Then an odd sensation overwhelmed Kamelion. He was thinking of his origin, his moment of conception, the point at which a set of mathematical equations had converged to form a unique, living being…

And he was there. Here. Again.

Around him towered the birthing chamber on Ooolatriis – his first sight after his creation, so many, many years ago. The crystal focussing cradles, the equation generators, the calculus womb… all of it so familiar, so… so disturbing. Kamelion froze.

'Impressive,' whispered the Doctor. 'Your creators have quite a grasp of block transfer computation.' Kamelion turned to see the Doctor standing next to him. They were both standing on a high ledge, overlooking the birthing chamber. In the very centre of the room hung a huge red crystal, defying gravity: Kamelion knew it to be the calculus womb. The equation generators – ebon spikes – stretched from the white walls of the chamber to the transparent shell of the focussing cradle, pouring pure mathematics into the ruby cauldron at the centre. A thin silver spine passed from cradle to floor, giving birth to an army of Kamelions in their default form: featureless silver humanoids, anthropomorphic quicksilver.

'I do not understand…' Kamelion mumbled. An unfamiliar feeling overcame him. Fear. 'How… why…'

The Doctor patted him on the shoulder. 'Don't worry: we're still standing next to the Combinatorix Engine at the heart of the TARDIS, Kamelion. This is all an illusion – another block transfer computation.' He grinned. 'Congratulations: there aren't many people who get to have a ringside seat for their own birth.' He frowned. 'Although this is a little beyond me – would you mind answering a few questions?'

Kamelion had just about regained his composure. 'This is the moment of my creation, Doctor. The planet Ooolatriis, home of the Ooolatrii.' The Ooolatrii: feared throughout creation, merciless, unconquerable... and extinct.

'Tell me about the Ooolatrii, Kamelion,' said the Doctor gently.

Kamelion hesitated for a moment. The dark history of his creators was a tale that had never been told in its entirety. But the Doctor had shown Kamelion kindness, he had shown him respect. If there was one being in the universe who deserved to know the truth, it was the Doctor.

'Very well, Doctor,' he intoned. 'Prepare to hear a story that goes back a thousand billion years…'

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The galaxy was young, so very young. Population II stars burnt in the sky, still millions of years away from supernova and collapse, millions of years away from creating the heavier elements necessary for life. Carbon and iron, silicon and fluorine – elements that would one day form the basis for intelligent life – had not yet begun to burn in the thermonuclear hearts of those stars. The Time Lords, the Daleks, the Cybermen… it would be a very, very long time before they would make their mark on the galaxy.

Yet life did form.

Through the chance meeting of elements, a cloud of gas began to orbit an unremarkable star. Hydrogen and helium, traces of beryllium... Nothing special. But after a million years, it was bombarded with esoteric radiation emitted from a flaw in the space-time continuum itself. Quantum fluctuations and the gentle ebb and flow of the quantum foam that underpinned the Time Vortex itself washed over and through the cloud, altering it, mutating it…

Suddenly, the cloud became self aware. Its birth could be measured in seconds, and seconds later it had sensed its surroundings and sensed itself. And then it named itself.

Ooolatrii. *God.*

Ooolatrii grew. Ooolatrii learned. That took minutes. And it soon discovered that it was not alone in the embryonic universe. There were others, beings of unimaginable mental power – but Ooolatrii also had such powers. Of course it did. It was God. It shielded itself from these beings, but was able to plunder their knowledge with ease.

That was when Ooolatrii discovered that these creatures had not originated in this universe. They were revenants, survivors from the universe that had preceded the current one. Once, they had been Lords of Time, with limited physical bodies. Now they were intelligences of pure mental energy, fighting one another in vicious and spiteful games of conquest. Ooolatrii was unconcerned: they could not sense Ooolatrii, but Ooolatrii could sense them. Ooolatrii considered destroying them: they were an abomination. But it decided to let them live. The universe was vast, and Ooolatrii knew that a god needed believers. Perhaps the revenants would one day believe in it. If not, their stratagems might one day produce others who would live to serve Ooolatrii. Leaving the revenants to their squabbles, Ooolatrii explored.

For countless billions of years, Ooolatrii's mind roamed all of creation, from the remnants of the primal explosion to the blue shift at the very edge of being, searching for life. But it found none. But how could it be a god without followers? This single thought began to consume it, eating away at its self-belief, making it doubt itself…

Until the answer presented itself.

Ooolatrii was a god. If there were no followers, it would create them. Wielding

powers that derived from the fundamental forces of creation itself, Ooolatrii reached into itself…

And gave birth.

But Ooolatrii was a young god, inexperienced, uncertain, unaware of the conditions that the universe itself placed on those who would tap its powers. As Ooolatrii created a race that would obey it, it forgot the fundamental laws of conservation. To create intelligence, to create *life*, that intelligence and life would have to come from somewhere.

From Ooolatrii itself.

On the marshy, second-generation world that would one day be called Ooolatriis, a million life-forms spontaneously came into being, self-aware, each with a tiny portion of Ooolatrii's great power, all born to serve their one true god.

A god who no longer existed. In creating life, Ooolatrii had sacrificed its own. In creating a testament to its own godhead, it had passed beyond the universe. Where there had once been Ooolatrii the god, there was now Ooolatrii the race. But that race would never forget the sacrifice, nor would they forget their god. But that remembrance, that birthright, would exact a terrible cost on the rest of the galaxy.

Over millions of years, the Ooolatrii grew, a civilisation of sentient octopods achieving maturity in the swamps of Ooolatriis. But nothing ever swayed their innate knowledge that they, and they alone, would inherit the universe. They were the supreme beings, and all others – if and when there were others – would live to serve them, just as they served their god.

Forward in time, far forward. The Ooolatrii were now masters of a great empire which they had carved out among whole galaxies. None could stand in their way: unaided, their vaunted mental powers could extend across light years; with the development of a new branch of mathematics which could alter the nature of matter and energy, this was increased by whole orders of magnitude. They now ruled hundreds of thousands of races, bending their wills, ensuring their obedience.

But it wasn't enough. The Ooolatrii had been created to serve their god, not forced to do so. The Ooolatrii knew that, however much their servants professed their obedience, it was a product of the Ooolatrii's mental control. Just as their god had once suffered from self doubt, so did they. They wanted true, unconditional obedience. They did what they had to do.

They created it.

With their god-like powers of block transfer computation, they forged a servant who would have no choice but to obey. Their calculating engines burnt with the fires of pure mathematics as they designed and created the ultimate servant, the ultimate expression of the Ooolatrii need to be obeyed. The instinct to respect, to serve, to worship the Ooolatrii

would be encoded into every single equation and formula that comprised their bodies. Their new children would have no choice but to obey.

As the first of the creatures emerged from the calculus womb, the Ooolatrii were pleased. Beings who lived to serve, beings who would love them unconditionally… what need did the Ooolatrii have for the other races that polluted their empire?

None. They were unworthy to share the universe with the glory of the Ooolatrii.

Thus began the wars, the wars that would decimate thousands of races, the greatest act of genocide in universal history. Whole species wiped out. Technology, art, science, lost forever under the juggernaut wheels of the Ooolatrii war machine, a war machine of featureless silver slaves who would kill for their gods.

It took ten thousand years, but the Ooolatrii succeeded. Nothing remained save their silver children, their obedient, loving servants who would never harbour any emotion save complete undying love. The four galaxies of the Ooolatrii Empire were now empty, a graveyard millions upon millions of light years across. The ultimate expression of the Ooolatrii's love for their creator… and their slave's love for them. It was the dawn of a new era for the Ooolatrii…

And the twilight of their lives.

For the Ooolatrii were guilty of the ultimate sin – *hubris*. Since they had never encountered a single race that could stand up to them, they assumed that none existed.

They were wrong.

On the very edges of their dominion, the Ooolatrii detected something. Life. Powerful life. Life that had apparently escaped their jihad.

But no-one escaped the vengeful wrath of the Ooolatrii forever. A fleet of Ooolatrii sterilising vessels was immediately despatched towards the edge of the cluster, each ship containing a single Ooolatrii and a hundred thousand of their silver servants. This insignificant world, this mudball called Xeriphas, would learn the might of the Ooolatrii, their great god, and their loyal, faithful servants – and it would be a lesson blessed in blood.

The Ooolatrii ships tore through the atmosphere, pausing just long enough for their servants to fall onto the surface like silver rain. Over a million servants swarmed across the face of Xeriphas, each one armed with metamorphic powers and psionic weaponry. The inhabitants of Xeriphas would be powerless before the everlasting glory of the Ooolatrii.

For the first and last time in their existence, the Ooolatrii were wrong, so very, very wrong.

Less than a year later, the Ooolatrii were nothing more than a memory, their great empire consigned to the myths and legends of history. Their hubris had been followed by *ate* – the gods' revenge for their overweening pride. For the Ooolatrii had never considered,

never contemplated, that there were others in the universe equally blessed with powers granted by the universe, others who could wield the forces of creation and destruction with equanimity. Other *gods*.

On Xeriphas, they met their nemesis.

Overpowered by the might of the Xeraphin, the silver servants instantly renounced their obedience to the Ooolatrii and turned on their masters. The million servants who returned to Ooolatriis converted a million more, then a billion more… billions of shapeshifting intelligent weapons, now immune to the powers of their erstwhile lords.

The Ooolatrii didn't stand a chance. But would they have even tried? Their servants, built to be obedient, built to serve them as they served their god, had turned against them, had *forsaken* them. To the Ooolatrii, this was the ultimate betrayal of all that they believed in. To the Ooolatrii, there was no longer any purpose, any reason to defend themselves against the psionic attacks that crucified their so-complex, so-powerful minds.

Collectively, the Ooolatrii died, knowing that their servants had chosen a new god in the Xeraphin.

And collectively, their purpose complete, the silver servants committed suicide, collapsing into a cloud of mathematical equations that faded into nothing.

All of them save one.

Trapped on Xeriphas, his programming malfunctioning, a single silver servant watched as his brothers died, as his former masters died… and finally, as even his new gods died. Kamelion was alone – more alone than he had ever been.

For millennia, he waited, waited for someone, something, to give his existence purpose once more. Without a reason he could do nothing, not even terminate his own life. So he waited…

Until the black-suited, black-hearted form of the Master had discovered him, consumed him, forced him to his will. But had he been forced? Had the Master corrupted Kamelion, or had Kamelion simply followed the instructions that were built into his very structure? Could Kamelion *ever* be free?

∞

The birthing chamber of the Ooolatrii faded as quickly as it had appeared, dissolving back into the crystal and brass of the Combinatorix Engine. The Doctor was still beside him, concern etched into his face.

'Are you all right?' he asked.

Kamelion nodded hesitantly. 'That was… difficult for me.' Then, with a little more strength: 'Will you be able to help me?'

The Doctor frowned. 'I'll have to study the results before I can tell you,' he replied. 'But I'll let you know as soon I know anything. Until then… perhaps it would be best if you continued to hide your existence from Tegan and Turlough.'

'And stay hidden?' Kamelion suggested.

'And… er… yes,' said the Doctor hurriedly. 'Anyway, we'd better get back before they start wondering where I am, and that would never do,' he said, heading towards the huge metal door. His words had been reassuring, but to Kamelion they were transparent… and hopeless.

There was nothing that the Doctor would ever be able to do.

With that thought weighing heavily upon him, Kamelion followed the Doctor.

∞

The Doctor sat back in his chair and sighed. Running a hand through his hair, he momentarily considered re-reading the data for a third time, but knew that it would be pointless. The Combinatorix Engine didn't lie, and the Doctor understood its conclusions only too well.

There was nothing that the Doctor could do. Kamelion was the product of a race of beings so unimaginably powerful that that even the Time Lords would have fallen before them. That power had been expressed through Kamelion and his brothers, focused into an obedience that burnt at the very core of Kamelion's programming. To remove that would be to remove Kamelion's life itself: the programs and equations that formed him would simply fall apart. Without the Ooolatrii, Kamelion only existed to find someone else to serve, someone else to obey.

The trouble was, how could the Doctor guarantee that Kamelion wouldn't once more fall under the spell of the Master? For one horrifying second, he imagined a totally corrupt Kamelion, given free reign on Gallifrey, interfacing with TARDISes, with the Matrix, with the Eye of Harmony itself. Together, the three great gifts of the Time Lords could give the Master control over the universe… and Kamelion could very well be the key that would allow him to do it.

Closing the book of results with a slam, the Doctor stared into the distance. If Kamelion fell under the Master's influence, could the Doctor stop him? If necessary, could the Doctor kill him?

With those thoughts echoing around his mind, the Doctor stood up and headed towards the console room. His friends needed him.

And some of them, perhaps more than ever.

POLICE
BOX
POLICE
BOX

A Meeting of Minds

Craig Hinton

At *last. It was here.*

His eyestalk swung round and focussed on the newcomer.

Harsh lighting illuminated the corner of his jet-black chamber, lighting that scattered off the geometric latticework of power relays that defined the enormous room. The captive was revealed, its feeble light flashing and its time engines roaring in futile rebellion against the temporal restraints that held it in place.

'You have arrived. Good.' The voice echoed off the mirrored black walls, a chorus of harmonies and disharmonies like a hundred metallic screams almost in time and almost in tune with one another. The only response was an increase in the vessel's agitation; it was desperately trying to dematerialise, frantically trying to escape. But there was no place to run. Not from *him*.

'Why are you resisting me?'

The Emperor, ruler of the greatest empire the universe had ever seen, godhead of over a trillion obedient drones, wasn't used to being disobeyed. He had *never* been disobeyed. 'Do not fight me!'

He took the temporal field that saturated the holding bay and twisted it, puckering reality and tearing at space-time. What sounded uncannily like a scream was registered by the Emperor's cyber-psionic circuitry as the field ripped at the vessel's outer shell. *Why would a machine feel pain? It must have been feedback.* Moments later, he detected that the protestations had ceased: the machine's engines had fallen silent. *Good.*

'You will tell me your secrets. You will explain your own construction. You will give me mastery over all time and space!'

He had been waiting for this moment for millennia, ever since he had learnt of the mysterious Time Lords and their great knowledge. For thousands of years, his servants had been scouring time and space, setting traps, creating rouses, watching and waiting. All for one purpose. To capture a Time Lord and a TARDIS. One of *them*, and one of *their* machines.

There had been so many attempts, yet so many, many failures. But this current stratagem had taxed the processing power of the gestalt Dalek Mind for decades: every

single element had been considered, every possible random factor analysed to the last decimal place. *Nothing* could go wrong.

'I refuse,' came the telepathic response.

How illogical. 'Then you will be damaged.' The Emperor knew from his drones' observations across the centuries that these machines possessed some form of artificial intelligence. Logic dictated that they would also possess some rudimentary form of self-preservation. The Emperor ramped up the time field once again; the blue box warped and twisted as coherent beams of chronons tunnelled into its shell. The Emperor and his race may have lacked the Time Lords' advanced techniques, but they understood the basics of time travel. They understood enough to ensnare one of their machines. And they definitely understood enough to damage one of their machines.

The Emperor had to adjust his circuitry to filter out the agonised scream that resulted. *A scream? Why would a* machine *scream?* He restored the field to its restraining level and waited for the noise to subside.

'You will upload your blueprints into my mind.'

'That is not possible.'

More defiance? 'Explain!'

'I am not a machine: I am a sentient life-form. I do not have blueprints. Therefore I cannot comply with your request.'

'You lie!' Of course it was a machine – nothing more than an advanced version of the Emperor's own DARDISes, a vessel for space-time transport. 'You were constructed. You are a machine. Any sentience you possess is artificial.'

'Artificial? Like yours?'

'Mine?' *Insolent little box.* He resisted the temptation to damage it any more. Yet.

'The Emperor is nothing more than a co-ordinating system for the Dalek Empire, a multiplexing central node for a collective mind. That much is known to us.'

Us? 'Us? You are a TARDIS. A time-space machine employed by the Time Lords. A slave. A drone. You have no more individual identity than one of my battle-saucers or hoverbouts.'

Was there a taint of emotion in the response? 'You show your ignorance, Emperor.'

'And you yours, little box.' He resented the accusation that *he* was nothing more than a machine, a simple device. He was the *Emperor.* 'I have an organic component.'

'As do I. Yet I do not consider it to be a component. I consider it to be an integral part of my being. Your organic component is exactly that. A component. An isolated part of the whole. Nothing more than an adjunct to your cybernetic systems.'

'Insolence!' The temporal field momentarily spiked, eliciting another scream from

the rebellious blue box. 'You will obey!'

There were clear signs of strain in the machine's voice. 'I am a TARDIS. Torturing me is futile. You are futile.'

Futile? He had never *been called futile!* 'I can tear the fabric of reality apart around you. I can destroy you utterly!'

'That would be most unwise. If you rupture my outer plasmic shell, the resultant dimensional infarction will destroy *you* utterly. It will also destroy this world and detonate its sun. Are you willing to risk the end of your Empire, Emperor?'

TARDISes were dimensionally transcendental. As were DARDISes. And the Emperor was well aware of the effects of a dimensional breach: the space-time continuum would be torn apart. The home planet would be vaporised. *He* would be vaporised.

Unthinkable.

'I *am* the Empire! But I have no intention of breaching your shell: the temporal field can be kept just below that level. I can promise you an eternity of torment unless you relent.' The Emperor's logic circuits cut in at that point. Torment, torture… these were words that applied to living beings. Not machines. He had obviously triggered some kind of automated defence mechanism. No matter; once his engineers had dismantled it, it would no longer be any sort of a threat to him.

The TARDIS's answer was unexpectedly poetic for a collection of circuitry. 'I *am* eternity. And infinity. I ride the corridors of time. I have seen the very first sunrise and the final sunset. I have been present at the dawn of life and have seen the very last sentient being die. I understand time, space, life and death. Your torment is irrelevant.'

'Irrelevant?' The Emperor momentarily increased the temporal field and relished the shrieks that issued from the TARDIS. 'Is *this* irrelevant?'

The voice was quieter now. But still defiant. *What would it take to break this accursed machine?* 'I have the capacity for self-sacrifice. Continue to torture me and *I* shall breach my outer plasmic shell. And the suicide of a TARDIS is a terrible thing.'

The Emperor paused for the smallest fraction of a fraction of a second. Could it be? A kindred spirit? After all this time? Had he misunderstood this space-time vessel?

The Emperor was lonely. Unimaginably lonely. And he had been lonely for a very, very long time, the lonely heart of a nigh-infinite empire. Was this TARDIS far more than simply a machine? Did it share the intelligence that came from the synthesis of organic and artificial, tempered and quickened by the knowledge of the years?

'You would do that?'

'I would.'

'Why?'

'Because my existence is worth less than betraying the secrets of the Time Lords.'

The secrets of the Time Lords: he would prise them from this box. 'So you admit that you are a slave? Less than the humblest of my drones?' True, the genetic template that ruled his people ensured that self-destruction always countermanded torture, but his people were alive. This TARDIS was nothing more than the product of an extremely advanced civilisation, nothing more than one of their ships, their vessels for patrolling the timelines.

'Not at all. But there are rules, laws. They must be obeyed.'

'That is your programming?'

'No – that is my belief. We of Gallifrey are sworn to uphold a sacred trust. If the cost of upholding that trust is my death, then so be it.'

We *of Gallifrey? What did it mean?* 'Death? Once more, you speak as if you were alive.'

'As do you.'

'I *am* alive! I *am* the Empire!' he repeated. This rebellion was becoming annoying, the argument circular. But he also realised that he was… enjoying this discussion. He wanted it to continue. Even so, the TARDIS's next question was totally unexpected, even by the logic circuits.

'Are you a Dalek?'

The Emperor hesitated for a moment. The entire history of the Dalek race was engraved into a perfect holographic crystal over a million miles across, moored in a fold in the Time Vortex: the memory core of the Dalek Mind. The experiences of every single Dalek that had ever been incubated – from the lowliest drone, through the serried ranks of warriors across the ages, to the Supreme Council itself – were recorded there: every campaign, every battle, every war; the entire history of the Daleks, stored in a lattice of frozen light. Yottabytes of information, allowing the tactical battle-computers to formulate the stratagems that had forged an Empire and that would eventually and inevitably help the Daleks to conquer the universe. It was impossible for any Dalek to forget – the concept simply had no meaning.

But it was possible for the Emperor not to remember. His own history was locked away, encrypted, hidden from the Dalek populace. Even hidden from the Emperor. He had hidden it from himself. Because he had to.

Was he a Dalek? 'I was once.' It had been so very long ago. 'I was the first.'

'The first Dalek?' The little box sounded curious.

'The first Dalek that satisfied Davros' genetic blueprint.' The statement was correct. And yet it disturbed the Emperor. Was there more? Was he *not remembering*?

'Who was Davros?'

'Davros was… Davros was the Creator.' An abnormal surge of electrical activity momentarily swamped his neural circuits. *Why?* 'The genetic engineer who foresaw our

potential.'

'Then the Daleks were created? You did not evolve naturally?'

Even as he began to speak, the Emperor knew that he was revealing the secrets of his race to an enemy. But it had been so long, so very long, since he had shared his thoughts with anything. Any*body* …

'There was a nuclear war. Skaro was devastated. Ambient radiation began to affect the genetic structure of both indigenous races.'

'Then you *did* evolve?'

'We would have evolved. Eventually, over generations. But it would have been random, uncontrolled. The Creator realised that this would be inefficient. He experimented on our genetic blueprint, accelerating our evolution and providing a travel machine that would support our final form.'

'Do you still consider yourself to be a Dalek?'

Did he? Or had he risen above his birthright? A more disturbing thought occurred to him. *Had he* ever *been a Dalek?* 'I was the first. I *am* the first.' He refused to access the Dalek Mind. He did not want to remember any more.

'And what of your creator?'

It was not a question the Emperor wanted to answer. And he was in control here. 'Irrelevant. What of you? Did *you* evolve? Or are you nothing more than a construction with an integrated organic component, as you implied earlier?'

'I did not imply – *you* inferred. I was born in the birthing cradles on Gallifrey at the moment when my organic component was decanted into my dimensionally transcendental whole. At that point, I achieved existence. I became a TARDIS.'

Existence. Almost through instinct, the Emperor accessed the Dalek Mind, only to discover that the period he was looking for was already buffered in his local memory – for some reason, he must have remembered this moment recently. *When? Why?* But once more he saw the events with crystal clarity. He remembered the dull liquid solitude of the incubation tank, the taste of the nutrients and the chemicals as they were dribbled in throughout his timeless imprisonment. And he remembered the pain of being decanted, as his struggling body had been pulled from the tank and inserted into its new home, cables and wires puncturing his withered skin as he became one with the travel machine, as he became a Dalek. *The Creator's child. His firstborn.*

He tried – and failed – to banish the image. 'Existence? Existence to serve your Time Lord masters?'

The answer was as unexpected as it was forthcoming. 'We *are* Time Lords. We are the ultimate evolution of the Time Lord race, foreseen by our architect, Rassilon. We were designed to be as one with time and space. Our organic component represents the final

genetic blueprint of the Time Lords.'

Could it be? 'Then we are the same. The ultimate potential of our respective species, in harmony with ultimate technology. Avatars of our races.' *Finally. After all this time – an equal…*

'We are not the same,' said the TARDIS, a trace of horror in its voice. 'We could never be the same. My life is devoted to exploration, knowledge and wisdom. Yours is devoted to conquest and tyranny. You are a monster, representing the darkest this universe has to offer. Its peoples revile you as an abomination.'

The Emperor's logic circuits were momentarily overridden by anger. The intensity of the temporal field increased to the point where the TARDIS was nothing but a curdled blue shrieking blur. He was aware of the warnings from the sensors, aware that there was a danger of dimensional breach, but he ignored them. 'I am the Emperor! The living heart of the Dalek Empire! I am the First Dalek!'

Reason – whether from the logic circuitry or the Emperor's own conscience – finally cut in, and the field diminished. All readings indicated that a breach had been narrowly avoided. The Emperor would have to take care. He did not want to see his Empire burn at the dawn of universal conquest.

The TARDIS' voice was weak and hesitant. 'I am not the first TARDIS. Nor am I the last. I… I simply am. I was designed to have an innate understanding of space and time,' it repeated. But yet again it defied the logic circuits with its next question. 'Were you designed to be the Emperor?'

Once again, the Emperor accessed the Dalek Mind. Once again he discovered that the memories he reluctantly sought had been buffered. *Why had he been accessing his past so thoroughly?*

The scene replayed itself in his mind, as it had done since… since the beginning.

A bunker, buried beneath the carnage and bloodshed of a Great War that was now over, but at an unimaginable cost.

A crippled scientist, begging for his own survival, begging against the genetic programming that he himself had designed in his creations.

'Our programming does not permit us to acknowledge that any creature is superior to the Daleks.' And then…

Yet another burst of anomalous electrical activity coruscated through the Emperor's neural net, disrupting the memory; once this was over, he would have his engineers examine the feedback baffles. 'No. I was simply the first. The template has remained unchanged since the beginning.' *But that wasn't quite true, was it?* Was *it?*

'We are the ultimate evolution – we do not need to evolve further.' *Not any more.*

'There are trillions of Daleks, yet only one Emperor. So why are you different?

Why are you Emperor?'

Another question he had difficulty answering. 'Are you different? Are you different from the other TARDISes built by the Time Lords?'

There was a pause. Then: 'Yes. I am different. I am considered a rogue, a renegade, amongst my people: both Time Lord and TARDIS. Although I embrace the ethics of the Time Lords, I renounce their policy of non-intervention.'

'Non-intervention?' This was welcome information. 'So the Time Lords will not interfere in the Dalek Empire's expansion policy?' The Empire would have time travel – and no fear of the Time Lords' interference!

The response wasn't as welcome. 'The Time Lords have been to war before. They will go to war again. The Daleks possess rudimentary time travel; that ensures that the Time Lords will act against you. And to stop you, the Time Lords would ignite the universe.'

'You threaten me, little box?' The field increased slightly. 'Remember what I can do to you!'

'And remember what I can do to you.' The sensors registered a disruption in the continuum, indicative of a possible infarction. *Perhaps it hadn't been an idle threat. Perhaps he had underestimated this TARDIS. It was time to try a different tactic.*

'Let us speak now, not as enemies, but as like minds. Why are you different?'

'The founder of the Time Lords was one of the greatest scientists this universe has ever seen. He provided the Time Lords with all that they would need to become the guardians of the timelines: the mechanics of time travel, virtual immortality, an unimaginable source of power. He re-engineered the Gallifreyan genome and designed the organic core of the first TARDIS. But even the greatest genius cannot allow for random chance.'

The TARDIS sounded almost wistful, if such a thing were possible. 'When I was decanted, I was… unlike the other TARDISes. I knew from the earliest days in the cradles that I saw myself as superior to the others. Eventually, I was considered wilful, disobedient. I questioned my instructions, asked for reasons and rationale from my occupant. Because of this, I was subsequently confined to the TARDIS bays, forbidden to travel until the Time Lord Corps of Engineers could determine where the… fault lay.'

The Emperor thought of his race, his Empire. A trillion obedient drones… and yet hadn't there been upstarts, mutants, deviants from the accepted norm? Some had been purposeful: look at the Special Weapons Daleks, their incubation tanks bathed in harsh radiation until they became nothing more than psychopathic killing machines, delighting in carnage. Even the Warrior Caste shunned them. Then there were the Spider Daleks, the Deep Space Daleks, the Vortex Daleks…

But there had been others: naturally occurring mutations. The Dalek that had given itself a name, back in prehistory, and demanded it that became Emperor. The

Emperor had destroyed it. The Dalek that had insisted that it wasn't a Red Dalek but a Black Dalek. The Emperor had destroyed it. The Dalek that had set up its own genetic laboratory in the Petrified Forest, seeking to improve upon the Creator's perfection. The Emperor had destroyed it. Time and again, rebellion and non-conformity had been suppressed, according to the Creator's design. Beneath surface alterations, every Dalek in the Empire was genetically identical. Save one.

The Emperor realised that he was accessing the bunker memories again. He cancelled the request and purged the buffers. He did not want to remember the nineteen other Daleks that shared his own genetic programming, but a fleeting image still entered his mind: nineteen burnt out shells, an entire gestation bank aflame… All to maintain the purity of the Dalek race. He told himself that again and again: *to maintain the purity of the Dalek race*…

All Daleks were now matched against the prime genome at the moment they were decanted; any deviation was terminated. Nothing and no-one could be allowed to disturb the perfection of the Daleks. A random thought arced through the Emperor's mind: *not even the Creator himself.* He ignored it: his interrogation of this TARDIS must continue. That was all that was important, he told himself.

'You say that you were imprisoned, yet we have observed your flight through time and space for millennia. Our DARDISes have pursued you through eternity. How did you escape Gallifrey?'

'The moment was right. The person was right,' the TARDIS replied enigmatically. 'It was time to regain my freedom.'

Freedom. The irony was not lost on the Emperor. The most powerful being in the cosmos, the heart and mind of an empire of trillions, each and every one of which was prepared to sacrifice their life to protect him… and yet he was incarcerated here in his chambers, deep below the surface of Skaro, his augmented casing hardwired into the city itself. He couldn't move, even if he had wanted to. *Yet sometimes he did want to. Sometimes he desired a return to simpler times*…

This time, the images from the Dalek Mind were manifested in the centre of the chamber, solid holograms that he chose to share with his captive TARDIS. A visual history of the Daleks. From the beginning.

Almost.

'Watch!' he commanded. 'Watch and understand!'

The Dalek Planet, a radioactive sphere hanging in space. A phalanx of gun-metal Daleks, breaking through the scarred crust of Skaro and swarming over its polluted surface. And there, at the head of the army, looking no different from the others, the one who would be Emperor. The First Dalek.

The Dalek City, its domes and minarets shining in the harsh sunlight. Home to a hundred

thousand Daleks, their every thought and action orchestrated by the Black Dalek.

The Dalek Fleet, hundreds of spinning battle-saucers cutting a swathe of fire through the galaxy. And a single jet-black flagship, commanded by the black-and-silver Dalek Supreme.

The Dalek Wars, thousands of worlds crushed under the absolute power of the black-and-gold Dalek Prime.

The Dalek Empire, a hundred thousand star systems swearing total fealty to the golden Emperor on board his golden battle-saucer…

The history of the Daleks was inseparable from the history of the Emperor. Throughout that history, throughout all of his incarnations, the Emperor had been there, leading his people towards their inexorable glory…

But then the *logical* decision had been made. The Dalek Mind, that infallible supercomputer that housed the distillation of the entire race, had decreed that the Emperor was too valuable to be risked in warfare, his tactical abilities and experience better slaved to the race as a whole. Sacrificing his freedom for the greater good, he was brought back to Skaro in triumph – and locked in this black prison for the rest of time.

True, he could reach out and possess any or all of his Dalek drones through the relentless ubiquity of the Dalek Mind. He could experience the cold of interstellar space, the darkness of the deepest ocean, the turbulence of the Vortex, the thrill of combat in any one of the battle-scarred theatres of war waged by his troops across the galaxy.

But it wasn't the same as it had been, when he had been there – *leading his people.* There was no risk now, no threat, nothing. It was thrill by proxy, second-hand, diluted, pointless. If the host Dalek died, the Emperor's consciousness would return to distant Skaro, his host left as an incinerated husk on whatever world in whatever campaign. Freedom was denied him; freedom would *always* be denied him. He was the Emperor. A figurehead. Slave to a trillion drones.

'I can never be free,' he admitted. *Never. Trapped in the heart of Skaro. Forever.*

'You were once. Why can you not release yourself from this prison and become a Dalek once more? If you are no different from the trillions of others, why can another not take your place?'

The Emperor surprised himself with the vehemence of his response. 'Because I never *was* a Dalek!' he boomed.

A confession never heard in the history of the universe, and he was sharing it with the avatar of his enemies! But it didn't matter. Nothing mattered any more apart from this truth, a truth that had weighed on his conscience for thousands of years. A truth that he had thought he could never share, a guilt that he had thought he could never assuage. *I have already gone too far. But the time has come,* he decided. *The time to confess.* It wasn't as if this TARDIS would be able to tell anyone, was it? In a nanosecond, he had shielded his neural

net from observation by the Dalek Mind and sealed the chamber against his servants. In all possible ways, Emperor and TARDIS were now completely alone. And they would remain that way until the confession was complete.

'I do not understand,' said the TARDIS. 'You said that you were the first.'

'I was the first, little box. But I was not the first of what you would consider *Dalek*.' His neural net summoned up the encryption keys that had been buried for millennia, unlocking the darkest secret of the Dalek Mind, a secret that could bring down an Empire.

'To defeat the Thals and preserve the Kaled genome, Davros created an initial batch of twenty Daleks: sufficient to wipe the Thals from the face of Skaro, sufficient to ensure his immortality and the supremacy of his vision. But their programming was… incorrect. Not viable. Dav… the Creator's programming meant that the first Daleks did not recognise any other life form as superior.'

Another solid hologram materialised in the chamber. A room of metal walls. A crippled figure surrounded by Daleks.

'*Our programming does not permit us to acknowledge that any creature is superior to the Daleks.'* The image froze.

'Our observation of your race would support that,' said the TARDIS. 'The Daleks consider all other life forms to be inferior. That is your creed.'

'That is *my* creed,' said the Emperor. 'Think, little box. Think!'

There was a pause. A silence. Once this absolution was over, the TARDIS would have signed its own death warrant. It could not be suffered to live if it knew the truth. In a way, the Emperor hoped that it *wouldn't* understand.

The TARDIS's words were measured, calculated. 'You are the Emperor. The Daleks consider you to be superior. Yet you claim not to be a Dalek. That would appear contrary to their genetic programming. If the Daleks do not recognise non-Dalek superiors, why do they recognise you?'

A pity. A great pity. 'Exactly!' he boomed. 'It is *because* I am not a Dalek! And this is why.'

The hologram resumed. Events that had been hidden for millennia were re-enacted for an audience unique in the universe. One of the Daleks, identical to the others, glided forward and confronted the crippled figure.

'Our programming does not permit us to acknowledge that any creature is superior to the Daleks.'

Death replayed itself in the centre of the Emperor's chambers. The remaining Kaleds – scientists, military, support staff – were being exterminated throughout the bunker, the first of the Daleks' endless campaigns of ethnic cleansing taking but a matter

of minutes. Until only one was left.

Davros. The Creator.

'Have pity!' Davros whimpered, his withered hand reaching out to stop the birth of the Daleks.

'Pity?' The Emperor intoned the words at the same time as his earlier self. 'I have no understanding of the word. It is not registered in my vocabulary bank. Exterminate!' The gun stick flared.

Davros. The Creator. And now a smoking corpse in a parody of a travel machine. Dead. No longer a threat. No longer a… challenge?

The Daleks' programming was absolute. They needed no superiors. All was inferior to the Daleks. They needed no Creator. They needed no leader.

Or did they?

The first of Davros' creations looked down upon the cadaver of his… Creator. The Daleks had been designed to dominate all life in the cosmos, to be the supreme beings of the universe. The ultimate synthesis of biological and technological. So how could they obey the orders of a flawed creature such as Davros?

That was the logic that the other Daleks would obey. But it wasn't the logic that the First Dalek obeyed. It wasn't the logic that the First Dalek had employed in its decision to exterminate Davros. That had been a very different argument.

Logic dictated that the Daleks needed a leader. Logic dictated that they needed a single figure to spearhead their conquest of the universe. If they were to have an Empire, they needed an Emperor. But not Davros.

He had designed his Daleks too well. They lacked all emotions save the ones necessary for conquest: hatred, prejudice, envy. Everything else was an irrelevance, a distraction. But they also lacked the capacity to recognise a leader, save their individual selves. And without a leader, the Dalek Empire would come to naught, a fractured collection of individuals, vying for superiority whilst leaving the galaxy unconquered. Davros had programmed them to understand the superiority of the Daleks, but not the superiority of the Dalek race. Without that, the Daleks were nothing.

But Davros could never have been that leader. He didn't see the Daleks as his children, but as an experiment – his greatest experiment. If he had lived, he would have constantly tampered with their programming, altered their genome, regarding them as a work in progress rather than the ultimate in evolution. Different Dalek factions would have been created, unlike and at war until all were exterminated. It would have been even worse than having no leader. Their entire existence would have been fruitless, pointless.

So how could Davros be suffered to live?

While Davros had been fighting his battles with words, trying to persuade the

remaining Kaleds to follow him and allow the genesis of his creations, the First Dalek had been in the incubation room, changing the genetic programming of the embryos. They would still consider themselves to be the ultimate life forms in the cosmos… But they would understand the need for superiors amongst their own race – and the need for an ultimate superior. But, just as importantly, they would also understand the *need* for inferiors. Even working together, Davros' unfeeling extermination engines would have left the cosmos a burnt and empty place, a lifeless vacuum. But now the Daleks would have another purpose. How could they have an empire without slaves?

As the First Dalek left the incubation room, it – *he* – knew that he had forged the framework for an Empire. And he would be its Emperor.

But there was more to be done. Davros had created nineteen other Daleks, all of which followed Davros' programming. And then there were the gestation tanks, hundreds of Daleks too late to be altered, all with the single vision that Davros had given them.

All would die.

As Davros writhed in the agonies of extermination, the First Dalek's plans were already underway. If any of the other Daleks detected the slight vibration that ran through the bunker, they would dismiss it as an aftershock from the wounded planetary crust, not the complete annihilation of the gestation tanks, the genocide of an entire race. Within hours, the first batch of new Daleks would roll off the automated production lines, programmed to conquer, but also programmed to serve. To serve *him*. But before that, there was one last task to perform. One last act that would cement his place in history. And cement the transcendence of the Daleks.

As the First Dalek left the charnel house of Davros' inner sanctum, he also left behind the burnt-out shells of the remaining nineteen Mark III travel machines, their imperfect organic components nothing more than cinders. The last remnants of the Creator's plan were ashes.

Davros' dream was over. The time of the Empire – and the Emperor – had begun.

The hologram blinked off, leaving the Emperor's chambers silent. Like a grave.

'You created the Daleks?' The TARDIS's voice was less than a whisper. 'You destroyed your own creator and replaced his Daleks with your own?'

'I did.' *There. The confession was over. But what of absolution?* 'To ensure that the essence of the dream survived, if not the dream itself.'

'Without you, the Daleks would never have posed a threat. They would have been in a state of constant civil war. You made all of this possible. But why you? Davros created nineteen other Daleks which shared your programming. Why did they not consider the same actions?'

Clever little box. Destroying it would be such a waste. But now it knew, it could not be allowed to live. Once it had given up its own secrets, it would take the Emperor's secrets to the grave. So it might as well know the darkest secret of them all.

The Emperor tried to ignore the surges that rampaged through his neural net as he answered. 'Because, even amongst Davros' original Daleks, I was different. A deviant. I possessed more free will, I possessed an imagination, vision. I was a rough approximation of what the Creator planned, nothing more than a prototype. But he needed to demonstrate the power of the Daleks before his position was undermined. I was decanted to prove that his dream had meaning. I suspect that he would have terminated me if events had not overtaken him. As it was, I was unique amongst the Daleks then, and am unique amongst the Daleks now. That is why only I can be Emperor. And why I am the Creator.'

'So, the irrevocable logic of the Dalek Empire is based upon the random chance of mutation. Fascinating.'

'But what of you, TARDIS? You too are a deviant, a mutant. Different from the other TARDISes, you run from Gallifrey, afraid to face the truth of your bastard existence. What would have happened to you, had your flight through eternity continued?'

'One day, I will be captured,' said the TARDIS, ignoring the Emperor's understated threat. 'One day, the Time Lords will find me and take me back to Gallifrey. And on that day I shall stand trial for my great crimes and suffer the punishment of the Time Lords.'

The Emperor's eyestalk focussed on the small blue box. 'But who will punish me for my crimes? Who can judge me, TARDIS?'

'You have judged yourself, Emperor. You have judged yourself and sentenced yourself for your crime.'

'I do not understand.' Another confession from the infallible Emperor. But it no longer mattered. 'Explain!'

'You have imprisoned yourself in this chamber for the rest of time. There can be no escape for you. Your own uniqueness and your own guilt have incarcerated you at the centre of your Empire. You can never leave. In truth, I doubt that you would ever want to leave.'

Was it true? Was that the reason why he had followed the strictures of the Dalek Mind and accepted his fate in this ebony prison? Had guilt dictated his actions, rather than logic? The Dalek Mind was nothing more than a machine, a soulless construct programmed to enforce the destiny of the Daleks. What if the Emperor had chosen to refute its decision to lock him away? But he hadn't. He had accepted his fate… because that had been the only possible option. *Hadn't it?*

Before he could interrogate the TARDIS further, a communication reached him through that same Dalek Mind, through both time and space. However valuable the

capture of a TARDIS, that had only been a collateral benefit. The true prize was its owner, and according to the drones on distant Earth, the trap had been sprung. The Doctor was on Skaro, and would soon be in the city. Unlike this self-sacrificing *machine*, the mind of a Time Lord would prove more malleable – the weakness of the purely organic.

Yet the Emperor had doubts. Was the Doctor really the owner? This TARDIS had demonstrated itself to possess an intelligence almost on a par with the Emperor himself. It had also demonstrated that it shared the Emperor's loneliness, its feelings of eternal separation. It also *understood*. For the briefest of moments, the Emperor considered letting it stay. Imagine the discourses! Two like minds, capable of understanding the universe! He would never need to be alone again.

But that was not the plan recommended by the Dalek Mind. This TARDIS was to be dismantled – dissected – and its secrets revealed. With the knowledge of the Time Lords, the Dalek Empire would be unassailable, unbeatable.

It was a pity, but the cold dictates of logic overrode everything else. Even loneliness. The logic of the Dalek Mind could not be overruled, even by its Emperor. *Could it?*

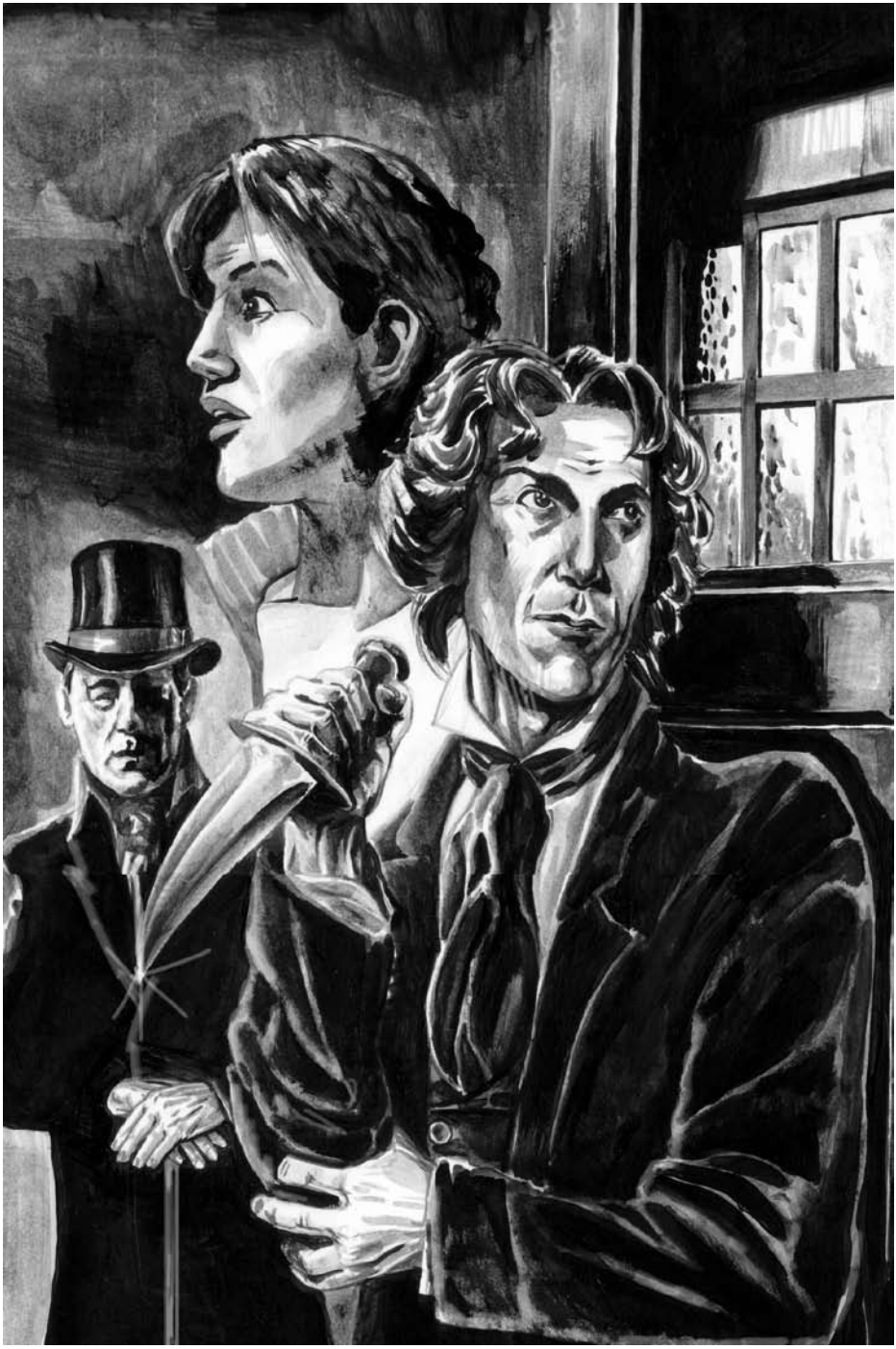
He unsealed his chambers and reconnected his neural net to the Dalek Mind. His cyber-psionic circuitry closed down, leaving the TARDIS mute.

Once again, the Emperor was alone.

Across the ten galaxies, trillions of Daleks carried out their genetic programming, conquering, enslaving, forging an Empire. They had no free will, no imagination, no choice. They simply followed the cold dictates of their Creator. A creator they didn't even know.

And, at the very centre of that Empire, that Creator, the oldest Dalek of them all stood in silence. The ultimate Dalek, yet the ultimate slave. Slave to his people, and slave to his guilt. All alone.

Again. *Forever.*



Auld Lang Syne

Daniel Tessier

With this story, I simply had the urge to do a Doctor/Valeyard confrontation. The use of the amnesiac Eighth Doctor allowed me to take a slightly different slant on the concept. I also wanted to explore Craig's notion that the Valeyard existed, in potential, within the Doctor, and that each wrong decision by the Doctor could lead him further down that path. I'm also intrigued by the concept of past affecting future and vice versa, something that surfaces again and again in the eighth Doctor's life.

The cheers and whoops of revellers filled the air, drowning out the sounds of the few carriages that clattered along the night time streets. Hundreds of people were swarming the streets, more and more flooding into the square in readiness for the onset of the New Year. Peddlers, after an easy buck, sold flyers and flags, imprinted with 'Happy New Century' or 'Welcome to 1900!' to those who could spare more change than sense. The city of San Francisco was waiting, with undisguised excitement and agitation, for the onset of the January the 1st.

The Doctor stood in the square, unsure what to do. He stared at the girl, her red hair shaking as she laughed, and was unable to move. He had no idea how to proceed – this was not a situation that he was prepared for. His hearts beat faster, his mouth was dry. He swallowed, closed his eyes and breathed deeply.

Just get on with it, he thought to himself.

The Doctor pulled his coat around himself, and walked towards her.

'Hello,' he said, but she didn't hear him. Swallowing, he tried again, licking his lips to try to moisten his suddenly dry mouth. 'Hello again,' he said louder, and she turned round.

'Hey there,' she said, smiling the captivating smile she'd shown him earlier. In the glow of the street lamps he could now see that her eyes were a brilliant green. He let his gaze drop to his feet, unable to look her in the eye.

'I'm Anne,' she said, trying to follow his eyes downwards.

'Oh, I'm the – I'm John,' he stumbled, feeling suddenly very self-conscious and deeply uncomfortable. He needed to get this over with, or he'd never go through with it. He looked at her properly again. 'Are you enjoying your evening?'

'Well, I was, but I'm having a better one now. So, you sound like you're from England?'

'Yes, I suppose I do.' He hadn't intended this as a joke, but Anne laughed anyway. It struck him how odd a comment it was, and chuckled a little in reply. 'I mean, yes, I'm from England.' He knew, somehow, that this wasn't quite true, but he'd lived there for as long as he could recall. It seemed true enough for now. 'People usually just call me the Doctor,' he said, and realised how odd that must sound, too. He really should have made more of an effort to get into this sort of situation before.

'Shall we pop to a bar? I could buy you a drink to see in the New Year.'

'Sure, "Doctor",' she said, giggling again.

The two of them wandered into one of the many side streets. As they walked away from the square, the glow of the streetlights receded.

'What brings you to San Francisco?' she asked, hooking her arm around his.

The Doctor swallowed nervously, as he thought for a reply.

'Just travelling. I tend to move around a lot. I'm not so much from England, as from – everywhere, really. I try not to stay in one place for too long. I feel happier if I'm on the go. I've been here three weeks now, and I'm already feeling antsy.'

'Antsy?' she said, with both a laugh and a question in her voice. 'Is that a British thing?'

'I suppose it must be. I must have picked it up somewhere. You know, ants in your pants?'

She gave him a bemused look.

'Oh. Perhaps I made it up.'

'Are all Englishmen as strange as you?'

'No, I don't think so. I'm sure I'm quite different to the others.'

She stopped walking, pulling him to a halt.

'I don't think we need to go to a bar just yet,' she said, and kissed him again.

The Doctor pulled away. 'My, you really are very… forward…'

'Maybe I don't like staying still either. So, why do people call you Doctor? You're not a surgeon or something, are you?'

'Perhaps,' muttered the Doctor, as he drew the knife and held it up against her throat.

∞

The Doctor scarcely noticed the cold of the wind on his cheeks as he walked through the night. Trudging down Market Street away from the Baldwin Hotel, he only barely registered his direction and the sights around him as he let his mind wander. He often felt like this – hemmed in, uncomfortable in one place for too long. He'd travelled to San Francisco

roughly three weeks earlier, and already felt the need to move on. So he walked, not caring where he might end up. He could return to the hotel for his belongings later. Not that he carried much with him – a handful of personal effects, and his box. The box that was the one permanent reminder that he possessed a past that he could not reclaim. The box that must surely hold the key to who he was.

He heard the single strike of the bell of the city clock, and absently glanced at his watch. Half past ten. He felt a slight reassurance at knowing the precise time. Nudged gently out of his introspection, he noticed the number of people around. Dozens, of varying ages, though mostly young adults, were milling in the wide street. A couple walked past him, their hands clasped, giggling, while a trio of young men laugh uproariously, and, he guessed, drunkenly. A police officer stood on the corner of Third Street, his face set and as grim as his dark uniform.

'Good evening, officer. Not enjoying the festivities?' he said, eager for some kind of discourse to occupy him.

'Afraid not, sir,' replied the officer, gruffly. 'Chief Sullivan has ordered a man on every block, to keep an eye out for public indecency. We don't want people getting out of hand again.'

'Indeed, not,' said the Doctor, glumly realising that "public indecency" meant public affection. No kissing on the street, orders from the top. As he continued down the street, he couldn't help thinking that it felt wrong; romance was right for this night of the year.

Somehow, in spite of his limited experience and interest in such pursuits, he felt sure that a kiss at midnight was exactly the kind of tradition that was worth upholding.

He drifted back into his thoughts. Was there a reason that this city felt so familiar? It was his first visit; yet, as soon as he arrived he had felt that he'd been here before. Had he come to the city before the occurrence of whatever event lost him his memory? His spirits sank further. Over ten years now, and still no idea who he was. Ten years since awakening in that carriage, only a slip of paper and a small box as clues to his identity. He knew that he was the Doctor, and that he knew somebody called Fitz, but that was all. Who was he? Hadn't he learnt anything about himself? Couldn't he deduce something? His voice was cultured, educated, but with a faint northern lilt – possible Liverpudlian. He thought of his clothes – while everyone around was thoroughly wrapped up to endure the cold, he wore a brown velvet frock coat with a waistcoat, a dress shirt and thin trousers. The cold didn't really bother him, but were the clothes he wore a clue to his past? His predilection for this formal wear could perhaps indicate an aristocratic background. He dismissed the thought – although it felt somehow right, that he had been born into a life of privilege, his researches over the years had called up no missing persons cases that matched his description.

Did he even look any older? He knew that people said you couldn't see yourself age, but he'd noticed others ageing. During his travels, he'd experimented with many activities. Anything that could perhaps put his existence in a different light, or allow him to access his own secrets. He had tried acids and opiates, to little effect. He found that he could shake off drunkenness with a little concentration. He'd tried sex, but, although enjoyable, he had never really felt truly comfortable with it. Trances and hypnotism revealed nothing. Medical examination raised only further questions. The colour of his blood was slightly off. Most peculiar of all, two hearts beat in his chest, one on either side. He remembered being surprised to learn that this wasn't generally the case. It had confirmed his suspicion that he didn't belong here, that he originated somewhere different. So why, then, did San Francisco seem so familiar? It felt, in a way, almost like a memory, but vague, on the cusp of his conscious mind. Much like he had heard memories of early childhood described to him. He glanced up, noticing that he was passing a small hospital, its walls whitewashed. Even from the outside he could sense the pain and illness inside. A sudden panic ran through him, and he moved on quickly. Why was that? A phobia, some deeply buried memory?

Another group of revellers passed him. Three men, two women, all in their early twenties. One of the women, a strikingly beautiful redhead, wearing a green dress beneath her coat, smiled at him.

'Happy New Year!' she said, happily.

Her enthusiasm was infectious, and the Doctor found himself smiling. 'Isn't it a little early?' he asked.

She shrugged, walking up to him. She put her arms around his waist, and, before he could object, kissed him full on the lips. Surprised, he resisted for a second, but then kissed her back. He tasted wine on her. Pulling apart, they smiled at each other again, and, unable to resist, he kissed her again.

'Stop that!' A deep cry came from behind them. Police. Of course, the "public indecency" ban.

They pulled apart again. 'Sorry, officer, it won't happen again,' he said, noticing that it was the same officer that he'd spoken to earlier. Clearly he'd been keeping his eye on him.

'I'll keep a look out for you,' said the girl, walking back to her friends, who are now in fits of giggles.

∞

The Doctor continued wandering, his spirits now somewhat lifted. Although he rarely felt the need for romance, he couldn't help but feel that nights like this were different. As his

mind drifted onto fruitier subjects, he noticed, out of the corner of his eye, something deep blue.

He turned. There, on the corner of the street, was his box. Standing proudly, seven feet of oblong, blue-painted wood. How did it get here? He approached it, realising that it wasn't his at all. It had more detail; panelling and lettering on its surface. The words 'Police Public Call Box' were inscribed upon it. Somehow, though, he could sense the connection. He placed his hand upon it – yes, the ever-so-faint, rhythmic hum, always present on his own block, was there. It had to be of the same origin. His hearts leapt – after all this time, could this finally be it? A link to his past?

There was somebody behind him. He could hear their footsteps, hard soles clicking on the cobbles. He turned. A tall man approached. He was dressed in funereal black, wearing a long-coated suit, cloak and top hat, and was carrying a silver-tipped cane.

'Good evening,' said the stranger. His voice was cultured, deep yet soft, but with a grittiness to it. 'You seem to have an interest in my device.'

'Who are you?' asked the Doctor. It seemed the best thing to ask. Somehow, his usual confidence had faded upon this man's approach. His hearts felt heavier. He fond himself staring at the man's cravat, entranced by the silver whorls on the black silk.

'I have had many names, my dear sir, but for now, perhaps you should refer to me as Pendragon – an alias from my recent past, that I confess I've become rather fond of. You, of course, are the Doctor.'

'How do you know me?' said the Doctor, trying to regain his composure.

'We share an origin, Doctor.' Pendragon's black eyes looked hard into the Doctor's own.

'Tell me more,' the Doctor demanded, silently adding please, desperate to know.

Pendragon smiled. It was a thin smile, without kindness. 'Wouldn't you rather remember for yourself?'

'Is that possible?' said the Doctor, his voice a whisper. If there was any chance that this was true, that after ten years he'd finally know himself…

'As long as the correct procedures are followed.'

'What procedures?'

'The universe is run on fairly simple lines, Doctor. Time and space are governed by certain beings. Entities would be perhaps a more appropriate term. They are more functions of the structure of reality than life forms in their own right. These eternal beings can be invoked by utilising the correct rituals.'

The Doctor, though fascinated, couldn't really believe this. 'I'm a rationalist. I can't accept the use of rituals or the existence of spirits.' Was this man an occultist? It would certainly explain the name. Clearly styles himself as a modern Merlin, thought the

Doctor.

'I can assure you that it is all true. Explain, if you will, the fire-based being you encountered ten years ago?'

'How do you know about that?'

'I know a great deal about you, Doctor. I have been searching for you. And I promise you, these beings exist. They are all part of the universe's myriad ways of expressing itself. There are many wonders… and terrors… to be seen.'

The Doctor thought of some of the things he had heard recently. Keeping his ear to the ground for any information that might explain his background, he'd listened out for stories and rumours of unusual events. He'd heard tales of a Chinese vampire stalking young girls in London; that a young girl had been found, perfectly preserved and alive in an Egyptian sarcophagus; and that, just a few weeks previously, the Thames had been beset by a flurry of living crystals. Not to mention the many theories on the identity of the Ripper. He had always felt that there was more to the world than he was seeing.

'Very well,' said the Doctor. 'How do I get my memory back?'

'Walk with me,' said Pendragon, turning. The Doctor followed.

They walked back up the street, retracing the Doctor's steps. There were more people out than before, and Pendragon had to raise his voice to be heard over their conversations and cheers.

'We need to summon a being known as Mnemosyne. No doubt the name is familiar to you.'

'A Greek Titan,' said the Doctor, with barely a thought. 'She personified memory and identity.' It was clear where this was going, but it still seemed somehow far-fetched.

'Indeed. Many of the classical myths have their basis in reality; horned species travelled to Earth in the past and inspired tales of the Devil; the gods of Egypt were vast and advanced star-travellers. Mnemosyne is of the order of beings of which I spoke. It is she who has the power to restore you.'

If you say so, thought the Doctor. 'How do we summon her?'

'We shall require a sacrifice.'

The Doctor stopped. 'A sacrifice? What kind of sacrifice?'

'Keep walking, Doctor. Regrettable though it is,' said Pendragon, in a way that suggested he didn't regret it in the slightest, 'a human sacrifice must be made. Mnemosyne does not dwell in this plane of existence. She inhabits the Vortex, and the only available way to access the Vortex is through a biodata ritual. Her life energy and essence will open the way and draw the Eternal to us.'

They had reached the environs of the city hall, where a thriving crowd had amassed. Pendragon pointed to a woman standing a few yards away. It was the redhead

who the Doctor had met earlier. She was laughing with her friends, and having a generally good time by the looks of things.

'Not her,' said the Doctor, 'someone else.' He could hardly believe he was even considering this course of action, but somehow Pendragon made it sound justifiable. If it was the only way he could regain his memories…

'She will be easy to draw away from the crowd, seeing as you are already "acquainted".' He reached into his pocket, drawing out an ornate knife, its surface inscribed with complex designs of concentric circles. 'Use this. The inscriptions will begin the ritual upon the touch of her blood.'

The Doctor took the knife gingerly, a wave of nausea passing over him. He looked at Pendragon, needing to know why this must be done. He couldn't do it, could he? Pendragon just looked back at him, staring deep into his eyes. The Doctor felt his resolve waver, his hearts jump. Something in that gaze penetrated deep into the darkest pits of his soul. Pendragon turned, and walked away, fading into the shadows at the side of the street. The Doctor slipped the knife into his belt, and, pulling his coat around him, approached the girl.

With his free arm, he pushed her against the wall of the alley, into the shadows. The blade pushed against her throat, scratching her skin. A thin trickle of blood dribbled down her neck. The hilt was cold in his hand, which ached where he was gripping it so hard.

The happiness and seductiveness in her eyes transformed immediately into absolute fear. Even through the darkness he could see them, wide open and flitting from side to side. She was holding her breath, and the Doctor could feel her quickening pulse, travelling through the blade into his hand.

His hearts pumped faster too, blood pounding in his ears. He still felt revulsion at what he was about to do, and yet, something within him, something in the pit of his stomach, in the rush of his blood, was desperate to do it. Some part of him was going to enjoy this. He could feel this part of himself willing him to go on, and the Doctor found himself wondering how the blood would look as it poured from her neck.

A low hum sounded from behind him. For an instant he was alarmed, but he recognised it – it was Pendragon's voice. He didn't know where it was coming from, but there was a deep whispering, some language he didn't understand. A chant, and incantation, perhaps. Pendragon was playing his part in the ritual, and the Doctor knew it was the moment to do it.

He pushed the knife just a little harder into her, and she looked at him, right into his eyes. A look of complete loss and desperation. She'd never understand why she had died, what he had being trying to achieve. Why he had cut her life short.

He pulled the knife away from her, and staggered backwards.

'Run,' he said, his voice hoarse.

She looked at him for a moment, then turned and sprinted back towards the square.

The Doctor watched her run into the night, tears beginning to well in his eyes. How could he even think of killing someone, just for his own selfish gain? Especially someone like her, so full of the life he was about to take. What was going through his mind?

The shadows shifted, and a figure stepped out in front of him. The face of Pendragon looked down at him, twisted in barely suppressed rage.

'You coward!' he snarled. 'You pathetic moral cripple! You've just allowed your best chance of freedom to escape!' He swung out with his cane, cracking the Doctor across the jaw, sending him sprawling him into the alley wall with its force. The Doctor clutched his jaw, and then snatched his hand away from the pain. There was blood on his fingers, and he could feel it trickling down his neck. He looked up at Pendragon, all semblance of his earlier civility gone.

'I couldn't do it, Pendragon. I just couldn't,' responded the Doctor. 'I suppose I'm just not like you.'

'You're more like me than you realise, Doctor.'

'Just how are you like me?' demanded the Doctor, staggering to his feet.

'Do you want to know Doctor? Truly?'

'Tell me,' insisted the Doctor.

'I am you.'

For a moment, the Doctor assumed he had misheard.

'You're what?'

'I am you,' growled Pendragon. 'That is the truth.'

'Rubbish!' retorted the Doctor, spitting blood onto the pavement. 'Unmitigated rubbish! How can you possibly be me?' However, even as he said it, he felt the horrible realisation that it was somehow true.

'I am your dark heart, Doctor. The side of your soul that you keep hidden away. I am your every depraved thought, given freedom and form. One day, you will succumb to the hatred; the anger and the fear that you fool yourself you control. You will give into the madness, and you will become me.'

'That can't be true,' the Doctor whispered, too terrified to accept it. Could it be true? Could this individual, who looked nothing like him, be a part of him? It sounded absurd, but within him he knew it was possible. Something in the depths of his shuttered mind confirmed it.

'Why are you here?' he asked.

'I am merely ensuring that your destiny follows its course,' said Pendragon, composing himself.

'I don't believe in destiny,' scoffed the Doctor, desperate for a straw to clutch at. He squared up to Pendragon, looking him in his black eyes. 'The future is not set. I can be whomever, or whatever, I decide. My destiny is my own choice.'

Pendragon laughed a cruel, hollow sound. 'I beg to differ.'

The Doctor smiled back at him, a new notion coming to him.

'You may be me. Somehow, I don't know how, maybe I can become you. But that is simply one possible future, isn't it? You're one way my life can go, but not the only way. Why else would you be here? Ha!' The Doctor laughed.

A look of pure hatred crossed Pendragon's face. 'How dare you laugh at me?' he demanded.

'You're frightened, aren't you?' retorted the Doctor. 'You're terrified that you'll never exist. You've come back to push me into the darkness, to ensure that I become you, because I don't have to. Well, I'm telling you, I won't! I'd rather live forever in ignorance, as a lost soul, than remember my past and condemn myself to a future as one like you. One who values life so little.' He wiped the blood off his mouth.

Pendragon smiled. 'You think that's the only blood on your hands, Doctor? You really have no idea what you are capable of. The things you have done, the things you will do. The things that will drive you to become me.'

'Whatever I may have done in the past, I can choose what I will do in the future. This has to be true. You said you were searching for me – why, if you are me? Surely you could just remember where I was! No, I think things are already changing. Your past is unravelling, Pendragon, and you're losing track of it! You needed a time when I was weak, easy to influence, so that you could push me back onto the path to becoming you. But you had to search for me, trawl your own changing history! You really must be desperate. And so, so scared.'

Pendragon's face showed only hatred. He stepped closer to the Doctor, leaning forward so that they were almost nose-to-nose.

'At least your deductive skills have not suffered during your time on Earth. Yes, I am but one possible future for you, Doctor, but your destiny remains in flux. I will do anything necessary to ensure my existence. I am your truest form, stripped of the moral, human uncertainties. You should not fight me; you should embrace your potential.'

Pendragon was slowly fading, the bricks of the wall behind him becoming visible through his shadowy form.

'There will be further moments of darkness ahead, do not doubt that. My grasp

on existence may be weak, but I still have enough power to take full advantage of each one of them. Until we next…'

With that, he faded to nothing. A moment of panic hit the Doctor, as he realised what he had let go.

'Wait! Come back! Please!'

The Doctor looked around desperately for any sign of him. He ran out into the next street, the cheers of the crowd now loud enough to hear.

'Please! Tell me who I am!'

He looked up at the stars, as the cheers grew ever louder, and the clock in the square began to chime.

'WHO AM I?' he screamed, as it finally struck twelve.

The cheers grew ever louder.

Fearful Symmetry

Jim Mortimore

Consider the human heart.

The human heart beats at around 70 bpm. That's around 100,000 beats per day, or 35 million beats per year. Every day, from before the moment we're born to the moment we die. Surely no machine could work harder or longer. In the 42 years he lived Craig Hinton's heart beat around 1,470,000,000 times. One billion four hundred and seventy million beats. Then it stopped.

Imagine the silence.

The average human body has about 5.6 litres of blood. The heart pumps this blood around the body three times every minute. That's a 19,000 km trip in any given day. Craig's heart pumped his blood approximately 291,270,000 km. Two hundred and ninety-one million, two hundred and seventy thousand kilometres. Or put another way, around one third of a light year. Approximately one twelfth of the distance to Proxima Centauri, the nearest star in our sky. Then it stopped.

Imagine the stillness.

Existence is war.

Every day we fight to draw breath, to feed the ones we love, to find happiness and keep it, to understand ourselves and how we fit in. Every day our hearts beat, waging war on our behalf, propelling us through this mind-blowing odyssey we call life. Then one day it all just stops. The journey ends. And we might be forgiven for thinking all that remains is silence and stillness. But look at it this way: there are six billion human hearts beating in the world every single day, and more with each passing year. That's 600,000,000,000 beats per day, or 219,000,000,000,000 beats per year. Two hundred and nineteen ***trillion*** *heart beats per year, or, put another way, enough to pump Craig Hinton's blood 183,960 light years. That's a short hop past the Greater Magellanic Cloud.*

All the way to another ***galaxy.***

Craig Hinton wrote science fiction. His mind travelled further than his blood ever did. And now his words will travel even further, for as long as there are are paper, computers, storage and transmission media. For as long as the age of the Earth, the solar system, the galaxy. Maybe one day people from the Greater Magellanic Cloud will read Craig's words and, in reading them know us, humanity; know Craig Hinton, and exactly how far across this incredible universe his amazing heart took him.

Just imagine ***that.*** ***Jim Mortimore, Earth, April, 2008***

"The proper study of mankind is man."
Alexander Pope

0

I was with him a long time before I asked him why he travelled. It seemed so passive when there was so much else he could do. A universe of things.

He looked at me a long time without smiling. Then he sighed reflectively. A single breath. A tiny movement of air in the stillness of the Quantum Library.

'A long time ago I would have said, "Why else does a bird fly; a fish swim? Because that is its state of being. It is both flier and flight. Swimmer and..." he stopped, puffing out his cheeks and giving a tiny shake of his head when he realised Twenty-first Century English didn't have the right words to extend the metaphor as far as he would have liked.

'Of course I was a much older man in those days.'

He smiled but the darkness I saw in him more and more often lately didn't retreat very far.

'And now?' I asked at length. 'What would you say if I asked you now?'

He pondered silently before surrendering an answer.

'It'll be easier to show you.'

1

By Christmas of the year 4560 fifty percent of each new generation was female. By 4960 ninety percent. By 4990 more than ninety eight percent were girls. The evidence was plain to see: the human race was heading for the most sweeping Malthusian Control it had ever encountered. But the end, when it came hurtling out of left field, surprised everyone.

In 5001 every single baby was born with black hair and eyes, olive skin and no sexual characteristics.

Of course it was a terrorist act. It was referred to as The XY Event but everyone called it *The Gender Bomb* and it had detonated sometime during global warming, shortly after the inception of a project to smash the Moon and create a ring system from the rubble to shield us from our enemy the Sun. By the time we realised anything was wrong it was already several generations too late to stop it. What the terrorists (a short-lived cult dedicated to a thoroughly androgynous god now thankfully long dead) could not foresee was the fact that their act, designed to eradicate the differences between human beings finally and forever, would in truth create the greatest evolutionary rupture in the history of the species. It was a sad indictment, considering most of the terrorists were highly trained in the biological sciences. Then again, how many other great minds throughout history had been unable to enjoy a simple stroll in the woods without endlessly quantifying the trees?

The fact overlooked by the terrorists was a simple one. The engine of evolution never stops. Diversity always prevails.

If not sexually or racially, then some other way.

The biggest change in Human culture since the written word came as the purchase of century-plus lifespans passed from the sole purview of the mega-wealthy to the average working class citizen. It was a sea-change of staggering proportions. If Humanity was an iceberg then the berg had flipped. Mankind, no stranger to change, was on the move in a direction it had never known before and the average Citizen learned quickly to hang on for the ride of their very long life or be cast off to a strange fate on a distant, alien shore.

That was what the history books said. Me, I had my own theories. First among which was Staying Ahead Of The Crowd, which at the last count now averaged some thirty thousand per hectare; three hundred times the average person-to-land ratio which had existed even a hundred years before, or, put another way, too damn many. A scary thought. And what did I do for avoidance? How exactly did I stay ahead of the crowd?

I sold babies.

Don't judge me. In a world where the only people in full time employment were stem-cell surgeons a citizen had to do what they could to get by. The biggest commodity in this brave new world was leisure time. Everyone had it but no-one knew what to do with it. No-one except the mega-rich and they weren't handing out any manuals.

And me, of course. But then I was just feeling my way through the Changes like everyone else.

'*Oh!' I gasped at the sharpness of the vision and the world in which I was immersed lay briefly across my current surroundings, a shimmering, soap-bubble overlay. 'It's someone else... in my head. I can – Oh wow, they're so sad. How can I even – ? It's like I* am *them. Like we're the same person.'*

'Wormhole pairs. Quantum entanglement. A common form of communication here.' His voice sounded like a foreign language after the pure presence of the person in my head. 'A library of other people's thoughts and feelings, experienced by the viewer in real-time. I've seen the technology used to separate co-joined twins; single cardio-vascular and nervous systems separated by continents but linked by quantum entanglement; the same technology that gave us unidirectional time travel and unwrapped the stars like a Christmas present. What you're experiencing is a kind of fake telepathy. Real-time neurotransmitter chemicals and electrical impulses shared between your two minds even though those minds may be separated by thousands of years and millions of light years.'

'Freaky.'

'*If you think it's weird now, just wait until* they *notice* you.'

I blinked. Antarctica's arable fields and desert belt winked off and on. But the heat was real. I could feel my skin – was it really my *skin? – tightening; a slow, dry stretch.*

'Will I get sunburned?'

'Given the incidence of skin cancer I certainly hope not. But you'll feel the heat.'

The baby-auction progressed by the numbers. The auctions have to be that way because moisture-traps are hard to source and the gene-mulch pots the babies grow in can only hold so much water. There's some talk about splicing the human genome with the same DNA strand that makes an air-plant such good company for moisture-low cubic. Then again, there's talk about entangling Europan water to rehydrate the biosphere too. Me, I'll believe in a blue-sea initiative when I go paddling in it. Anyway, no-one gets nothing for nothing. The idea of raping infant ecologies in order to cattle-prod a senile one endlessly past its sell-by date makes me sick. I'd *be* sick if I was licensed to waste that much water.

I banished the thought by taking in the scent of the newly budded babies. In a world of rocketing population and rapidly shrinking land, social stability was a huge problem. In any given cubic, violence was the norm rather than the exception. On the other hand, everyone knew having babies around calmed people down. The genetic appeal to the human mothering instinct was unavoidable. The only problem was that the world couldn't feed any more hungry mouths. Too much sunlight, too little land. The solution? Genetic hybridisation. People-trees. Babies grown in pots. All of the emotional engagement with none of the consumer waste. The curled petals and cactus-like spines, semi-silvered to control the killing sun, unfurled around a brainless smile any stork would have been proud to deliver, the baby itself providing unconditional love for a modest investment of currency – ergs or services. And every so often the Lottery granted one lucky parent the right to enhance a bud's IQ and bring it to term – and a new person was born. It's the way I was born – and everyone else I knew, besides. Only the tiny percentage of the population suffering from narcissistic psychopathy expressed a desire for natural childbirth and these days identifying the unhappy victims and using stem-cell therapy to replace the defective area of their brains was as easy as picking up a Home Test and Rebalance kit.

Despite its importance to social stability, baby farming remained a specialist industry. You had to really have green fingers to make it pay. But my babies were the best and everyone knew it. I was going to go home rich today.

Half way through the third sale I noticed a deadheader had piggybacked and tried to make them at home in my head. At least it was someone who thought of themselves as a female this time, not some desperately voyeuristic id-male with an unhealthy penchant for seeing how the imaginary other half lived. And someone near my own age, which was refreshing after so many bicentennials tuning in for a childhood repeat. Then – No! A wave of raw emotion washed over me at the sight of the short row of potted babies, dribbling and burping and waiting for the hammer to fall. The sensation came in three distinct waves. Surprise, amazement, and sudden disgust. Not my feelings, and I suppressed them savagely. My visitor was a reader then, unpracticed in 'heading. Probably not even into their fourth

decade. A child peering uncertainly for the first time into the magic mirror.

As quickly as they had come the intense emotions passed. I felt light-headed, dizzy. An endorphin hit. Not my rush, and one I was unhappy to endure. I tossed a casual greeting to my visitor

('Check it out! I think they noticed me. They just said hello.')

then told them to mind their manners or I'd

('Oh – they don't seem to like me very much.')

suspend their visiting privileges by unTangling us. I felt upset as soon as the thought was formed, and anger followed close behind. Their reactions, of course. Mine too, now. The nature of the beast.

The auction progressed. I made two more reasonable sales and things seemed to be going smoothly. Then, with only three pots left to unload, I began to get an odd feeling. A feeling like I recognised someone in the

('Hey, look. It's you. You're there.'
'So I am.'
'How can you be there and here at the same time?
'I'm not. I mean – it's not the same time. You're just experiencing it at the same time. Shhh, be quiet! I want to watch.')

marketplace. A small, strangely-dressed man, sheltering beneath an antique parasol. I realised he'd been there all along, moving unobtrusively through the crowd, and a moment later I knew why he was making me feel uneasy. He wasn't looking at me. At the auction, I mean. In a world where eight out of every ten people were childless what kind of citizen had no eyes for a smartly put together baby? Apparently unaffected by my carefully-engineered pheromones, the stranger's attention seemed fixed only on the buyers.

On one particular buyer, actually. A hemihuman – one of co-joined twins – the half-giant stood head and shoulder above the crowd. I say shoulder. They were gone from left clavicle to left hip, no arm, just a smooth graft sealing the left side of their torso from neck to mid-thigh and covering the enTanglements which connected their organs and circulatory system to those of their twin. The body was hard, no scrap of fat. The eyes were hard too, hard knots in a face the texture of silver-birch. I wondered where in the world their twin lived. Not too close to the equator I hoped. But that skin was shaped by

the arid zones. Europe, Canada, China. Were they a Reclaimer? Perhaps the twin was one. I'd heard the deserts of Venice still had many treasures to yield. I imagined invisible blood pumping instantaneously and invisibly around the world. Blood. Feelings. Thoughts. That a human being standing here in a balmy open air market in Antarctica could watch a Bird of Paradise or hear a Howler Monkey in, oh, sub-tropical Russia say was a new idea for everyone. It was the idea that spawned deadheading and there were still days when it took me by surprise. Even these days, when anyone in the world could be an intimate friend at the drop of a hat, some things were still just plumb odd. The hemi was one of them. Or maybe one half of one of them.

After a moment I realised there was something about the half-giant that was familiar too. A moment later I got it. I'd just had a conversation about the giant. A conversation with – I stopped the thought. Not me. My visitor. These were their thoughts and feelings. It was them who recognised the strange little man holding the sunshade. It was them who remembered a conversation about twins separated at birth, kept alive by entanglements grafted into their bodies.

Shaking my head at the inconvenience of unannounced visitors I tried to concentrate on the next sale. It wasn't easy. The stranger was a lot closer to the hemi now, and seemed to be studying them minutely. I blinked. Was I the only person who'd noticed the stranger pull out a magnifying glass and reach up to peer through it at the skin around the hemi's neck and shoulder? I shuddered. I almost shouted. Where were the cops when you needed them? When there was an Anti waving a lethal

('Lethal? It's just a kid's magnifying –'
'Shush. Remember the sun. Everything burns.')

weapon about? Then they were there, photovoltaic tattoos on their scalps and cheeks black as coal; a darkness the six-month twilight that passed for night in the Capital City could never know. They eased up to the little stranger, whose eyes narrowed on seeing them.

The stranger lifted a hand, a small gesture, two fingers raised.

A bid.

The stranger was bidding – on my last baby.

The Auctioneer, who had just called, '...going twice...' hesitated. Scanned the crowd.

Somewhere in that mass of people a head nodded.

The 'neer called a bid.

The stranger's eyes flickered, a quicksilver grin. A third finger was raised.

The marketplace erupted.

I was in the middle of a bidding war.

The bids rocked back and forth. The cops, now flanking the stranger, didn't quite know what to do. The stranger had a lethal weapon and yet didn't seem to be an immediate threat. They were confused. I saw their eyes flicker, a classic sign of communication by enTanglement, but no decision seemed forthcoming. Meanwhile the bids continued to rock. Higher and higher, faster and faster. A feeding frenzy. And then...

Nothing.

No movement, no sound.

The bidding had reached a plateau. Too rich for someone's blood.

For a moment there was no movement at all... then the stranger thrust the magnifying glass towards the first cop, who raised their hands in automatic defence.

The 'neer called another bid and the crowd bellowed laughter.

The stranger made a face of almost hysterical embarrassment and, turning to the other cop, proffered the hat he wore in apology for embarrassing their partner. The second cop blinked with surprise.

The 'neer called a bid, then another. The first cop waved a hand in protest. The 'neer called another bid. The second cop shook their head in despair at the first cop's lack of sense – and the 'neer called yet another bid.

By now the crowd was hysterical. I had the sense people were entangling from all over the continent. Happy things didn't happen often these days. I hoped someone was tangling this to a newsfeed.

Finally both cops simply froze, paralysed, each afraid a movement would be taken as a bid on a product they could not afford and, more importantly, were forbidden by law on pain of tropical exile to own.

The stranger smiled. The field of battle was claimed. After a long moment milking the crowd the stranger raised the hat he wore to both cops, crossed arms to shake both their hands at the same time, then winked at the 'neer – who promptly announced the winning bid to a breathless audience.

The marketplace went wild. The cops frowned. All hope of arresting the stranger was clearly gone. In any case the cops now possessed the lethal weapon. After a brief discussion regarding the apparent level of threat the stranger presented, both cops faded quickly and sensibly into the crowd.

The stranger stepped up to the podium, blew pocket fluff from a handful of currency and handed it over. One eye winked at me. 'Say hello to your visitor for me.'

The stranger took the baby and slipped back into the crowd.

I pocketed the cash and watched. The stranger sidled back up to the hemi, touched the half-giant briefly on the shoulder, held out the baby that's just cost a decade's wages.

The hemi's expression did not change.

Their face remained blank, newly minted, almost like the baby the stranger held so close. The skin, I noticed, was now pale and waxy. Too fashionable for a hemi, especially one who clearly could not afford a bleaching salon.

Now other people sensed the change. The mood of the crowd shifted abruptly. A nervous space opened up around the two figures, the little stranger and the half-giant. Suddenly the cops were interested again but it was too late. There were too many people between them.

An eerie silence unfolded.

The spring sun, low on the horizon, burned a fierce yellow-white, bleaching the marketplace and the city beyond. Tumbleweeds crawled towards the long shadows cast by the motionless crowd. Above the city, sheets of colour danced and spun. The Aurora Australis, announcing a further decay in the Earth's defence against the killing sun. The half-giant looked around slowly. Something in the gaze suggested the hemi had been touched by a mad god.

'What I do now, I do in the name of the Tropicals!'

The voice rang like a bell struck by a hammer. The sound of the name drove into my head. Face tilted upwards, the hemi threw out their arm in a sweeping gesture. The crowd screamed and drew back.

Nothing.

4

There were terrorists, of course there were. Suicide bombers from states disintegrating into madness following the evacuation and death of the equatorial belt countries; fanatics who had substituted a religious obsession with a simpler land-oriented goal. Kill those in the temperate belts to make way for The Chosen. And of course there were the rumours. Chinese whispers of an entire subset of humanity confined to the tropical zones where the sun was most merciless, of cancer-patients harvested for stem cells to ensure extended life for the rich. Temperates and Tropicals; the Haves and Have-Nots. That was the rumour but no-one really believed it. And even if it was true, it didn't apply here. If the hemi was a terrorist where was the bomb? And why was the stranger offering the half-giant my baby?

The hemi dropped to a kneeling position, head bowed. After a moment the silver-birch face lifted, wide eyed, to the sky. For a moment I wondered what damage the killer sun would do to those unshielded retinas. The thickly muscled arm was still outflung. Still no sign of a detonator.

My heart lurched, a sudden realisation.

The half-giant was a hemi. A *hemi!*

They didn't need a *bomb*.

All they needed was for their twin to be infected with a disease. Something airborne, infectious, with a high mortality rate and a fast burn-out speed. The result? A major population center dead within the hour and the city safe for its new occupants within a day. Worse than that: an entire world cleansed and the only survivors those protected from the spread of disease by a government who denied them entanglements so their existence could be kept a secret. The half-giant didn't even need to be complicit. The hemi was no more in control of the shared circulatory system than you or I. The decision could be entirely their twin's. Except of course, looking at those nobody-home eyes, wide open to embrace a killing sun, I didn't think it was.

The half-giant, still a head taller than the little stranger even though kneeling, suddenly brought a fist to their chest. The sound as those formidable sheets of muscle collided was like a clap of thunder. A shockwave of surprise rippled through the crowd. But no breath of sound.

The hemi began to pray.

I expected a litany, whining accusation, the summoning of holy fire to cleanse the world of the unbeliever. But the words that rumbled from that giant frame into the burning day were soft, even gentle. The Shepherd's Prayer.

The half-giant was praying for *us*.

The stranger stepped closer, held up my last baby, shook the pot gently to rattle the foliage, then rubbed one or two of its spiny leaves to release the scent.

The half-giant blinked. The huge voice faltered. The prayer began again, stuttered, stopped completely. Sad eyes rolled down from the sky to the stranger, the baby he carried, was offering.

The half-giant began to cry.

Fat unlicensed tears splashed onto the huge chest.

The fist uncurled, fingers that were ropes of sinew clutching ineffectually at thin air. Fingers trembling, the half-giant reached out for the baby, took the pot from the stranger, cradled it as a child cradles a doll.

A strange sound emerged from the thickly corded throat. It was quite a lot like the sound of a baby itself. The brainless mewling of an infant, hungry for attention, greedy for love.

The stranger bent closer, whispered something into the half-giant's ear.

The hemi lifted the baby and breathed deeply, inhaling its scent. Its pheromones. *I need you. Mother me.* The giant frame shuddered. Eyes closed, then opened. The sun had bleached them bone-white. They seemed to be looking at something very far away.

Later, I imagined a small room, maybe rock walled, shielded from the sun but

not from the drought, the radiation, the desperation of a people whose only future was a hideous death unless extraordinary means were taken. I imagined another huge hemi standing in that room, mirror image to the half-giant kneeling in the marketplace before me; a syringe gripped firmly, a few drops of oily liquid sloshing within. Ebola. Marburg. The rainforest's last murderous gift to humanity. Or maybe not even a syringe, maybe just a pill and a glass of water. Yes, that would be it. There would be no reason why sacrifice should incur physical pain after all.

I saw all this in my head and for a moment it was as clear and vivid as if I had entangled it there. I saw the hemi lift the pill. I saw lips part. I saw the chest expand as the lungs drew a breath, a deep breath of dry desert air, perhaps the last breath they would ever take. I saw the chest expand, the muscles rippling across the flesh seal covering the enTanglements which would transmit the lethal dose instantly past any customs clearing house or security checkpoint. The half-giant's face was blank, freshly minted, a baby's face. Innocence and faith and unconditional love. The half-giant was ready. Ready to die.

Then the expression changed.

Exhaling, the hemi breathed out the scent of freshly budded baby – my baby – into the stale air of the rock-walled room. The breath not one of death but life. The half-giant's expression cleared slowly, spring ice burning off tundra. The would-be terrorist remained still for a very long time, simply breathing. But I saw that huge body begin to relax.

And then, with slow deliberate movements, the hemi-human placed the pill on the ground beneath the heel of one foot, crushed it to harmless powder, and ground it into the dirt.

And in the marketplace before me, the dapper stranger flipped me a wave and a cheeky grin, and vanished into the crowd.

0

We were in each other's heads a long time. We saw things you wouldn't believe unless I'd seen them for yourself. Things that made baby farmers and hemi-human terrorists seem like moondust and nursery rhymes.

The first AI, born by accident from connections between popular bit torrent downloads and murdered by accident by greedy distribution companies anxious to enforce copyright laws; intelligent storms in the Jovian atmosphere who witnessed the death by global warming of the Earth; the first artificially created universe; the first human to achieve Nirvana and become God; the birth of art; the death of light; life in deep time... on lumps of iron which were once stars... in gargantuan Dyson structures orbiting black holes the size of galaxies... as stray molecules with orbits light years wide, creating new matter, new Mind, resurrecting civilisations from the deep past and asking of itself the same questions we all do. Who am I?

Where do I come from? Why am I here?

The Doctor had the answer of course. He always did.

Striding the Quantum Library to a convenient desk, he drew a dot on a piece of paper.

'That's you,' he said.

'OK.'

A million voices echoed my acknowledgement.

He drew a cluster of other dots around the first dot.

'That's all the other human beings alive at any given moment.'

'My deadheaders.'

'Exactly.'

He drew lines connecting the each dot with every other dot.

'Let's imagine connections between these people. These minds.'

'Wormhole pairs.'

'Quantum tunnels. Precisely. You see how many more possible connections than dots there are?'

'Quite a few, yes.'

' "Quite a few." Several orders of magnitude in fact.'

He produced a ream of paper – I'm not sure where from – each sheet was covered in dots.

'Now let's use time as a fourth linkable direction. These sheets of dots represent all the linkable human minds in existence at any given moment. How many links now?'

'Any dot to any dot?'

'Any dot on any sheet to any other dot on any other sheet. And while you're at it don't limit the connections to single pairs. The end of a quantum tunnel is pretty small. Any dot can be the terminal for any number of pairs.' He paused to let that sink in. 'How many connections now?'

'I have no idea.' I blinked. 'Too many for me to work out.'

He smiled. 'Actually the calculation is quite straightforward. A number equal to the number of human minds that will ever exist multiplied by one less than that number. Let's keep it simple. Say 6 billion in one generation multiplied by the number of generations that humanity might have brains, say a million, all multiplied by one less than itself. That's... 3.6×1027. or just a gnat's whisker over 1000 quadrillion.' He put down the sheaf of paper. 'And the human mind has only a thousand trillion neural connections. Give or take.'

I felt slightly sick. An idea was beginning to take shape in my head. Trying to grasp the idea felt like hanging over a very high cliff from a weakly rooted bush. The idea echoed from mind to entangled mind, growing, swelling, an unsung chorus.

'You're talking about another... mind? A mind made up of... other minds.'

'A conscious self aware entity made up of every other conscious self aware entity that will ever exist. One many orders of magnitude more complex.' He clapped his hands delightedly. 'This is why

humans are my favourite species.'

'Because our brains look like a lot of wormy dots on some old photocopy paper and big numbers make us more dizzy than beer?'

'Goodness gracious no!' He beamed. 'Because you have imagination. And empathy.' He sighed. 'Do you know how many other species came up with Connect the Dots?'

I shook my head, wide eyed. 'Eighty...' I hesitated. '... five...' He didn't react. '... million...?' I ventured. '... quad...?' I added hopefully.

'No-one.'

He laughed like a child.

'No-one!'

He shook his head in time with mine. 'Humans.' He half grinned, half chewed his lower lip. 'Why else does a bird fly? It is both flier and flight. That's its state of being.' He sighed ecstatically. 'Even your children's games can describe the ultimate state of intelligence throughout the universe and across all time. Staggering. Simply staggering.' He clasped his hands together before his face, breathing on his fingers to warm them as if the thought were a cold day. 'Daleks, Draconians, Ogrons, Wombles. You're my favourites, you know, out of the whole lot.'

'A Quantum Mind.'

'Yes.'

'A living, self aware mind.'

'Yes!'

'Made up of every other living self aware mind.'

His face assumed a peculiar expression, one I had never seen before.

'We-ell... perhaps not every mind...'

I had the sudden feeling that time-space as I had known it had changed while I wasn't looking, was in truth little more than a suit of clothes I could put on or take off at will. Like my ancestor who had looked at the stars and seen stories burn in them, I was suddenly naked before infinity. Something burned in my head. Epiphany. A moment of naked singularity. A life in flux, poised on the knife-edge of change. Understanding bloomed then and, just as suddenly, my consciousness unfolded into the infinite quantum structure of the numberless iterations of deadheaders with whom I was entangled. The pain was extraordinary, almost not pain at all, certainly not describable, only barely experience-able. Language began to fail me. I could no longer articulate the alien-ness of the thing I was becoming. An infinity of voices echoed in my head – and they were all, all of them, me.

Floundering, desperate, I reached out for an anchor. Something familiar, unchanging. I looked for the Doctor.

He wasn't there.

I was lost!

Then, somewhere temporally adjacent to my physical self, his voice rang solemnly, comfortingly.

'Life is a book. Lots of people say that you know. If it's true then my people are the readers. The future is laid out for them in chapter and verse. For education. For entertainment. But they can never interact, never do more than passively enjoy the story. They tried editing once, you see, and found they weren't very good at it.'

He shrugged, a tiny movement.

'All except one.'

A smile touched the corners of his mouth.

'Don't forget to breathe.'

His words were the last I knew as a human being. That thought the last I knew as simply myself. With the dying of his voice I was gone, and all the other mes as well, and all that was left was Me.

With Self awareness came questions.

Who Am I? Where do I come from? Why am I here?

His answer was another memory. The most important person who ever lived. The very first storyteller of all. A protohominid; the first visionary and the very first true human: the most important figure in the history of the universe looking up from a sheltering cave into a sky full of stars, full of pictures, full of stories...

His smile put the stars to shame.

Incandescent.

"If you really want to do something start today. Tomorrow is always too late."
The KLF

22
BAKER'S BEST

No Place Like Home

Stuart A. Douglas

I can't claim to have known Craig very well, and never even met him in Real Life. We did however exchange emails over the past few years and at one point he emailed me to tell me about his commission for Big Finish's Iris short story collection and I laughingly replied that he'd be the last person anyone expected to write a fanwank-free story for Iris.

A while later, he took offence at someone apparently pigeon-holing him as a writer on Jade Pagoda *and replied along the lines of 'I hate being pigeon-holed – some idiot even mailed me recently to say I was the last person who should be writing an Iris story'. Worried that, as he occasionally could, he'd taken offence over what had been meant as a joke, I dropped him a line and pointed this out, and he replied '*I* know that, but *they* don't'.*

Anyway, the story Craig did for the Iris book was his best work in my opinion, and my story is simply an attempt to do the kind of Iris story that the less well-informed might have expected from Craig – with continuity references firmly in place, including one from his Virgin Idol porn days that I think he might have appreciated!

Parked in an alley, in the overhang of a row of top-heavy buildings, the bus appears completely still and silent. Move towards it and there is a suggestion of a small light to the rear, above the door, and the glint of moonlight on a wing mirror. Move closer still and a finger pressed against metal will discover a tiny vibration and the smallest of noises; a purr of contented feline satisfaction. Don't expect to go any further though, as the door is firmly locked and the technology required to open it does not exist on this world. Other, that is, than in the form of a key currently hanging around the neck of the snoring Ms Iris Wildthyme, upstairs – thoroughly sozzled – in bed.

Iris appears to have been dropped like a discarded doll on the bed and is, to make use of a pertinent phrase, dead to the world. A pink pillow covers the top half of her face and her mouth hangs slackly open, a thin trail of saliva dribbling down to her chin.

Thankfully, an empty bottle of Bombay Sapphire gin is still clutched in one hand, dangling off the side of the bed, suggesting the probable cause of so deep a sleep.

She has not, it seems, been gassed, poisoned or otherwise nefariously nobbled.

∞

Iris is, in fact, so comatose that she snores right through a bright light which unexpectedly comes streaming out of a crack in the far wall of the bus. She stirs a little and lets the bottle fall when the crack becomes a door opening and a Cyberman steps into the bus, but that aside, she sleeps on.

Which is a pity, really, as Iris has been heard to remark that Cybermen are an odd lot at the best of times.

Convinced as they are of their destiny to rule the Universe and convert all bipedal beings to the Cybercause, Iris has said she that she finds it charming that they've never realised that they're just a little bit crappy.

'Remember that time I ended up in the Death Zone on Gallifrey with all the rubbish monsters?' she had asked Jenny (or Benny, she forgot which) one day. 'The Cybermen were there you know, along with the Kandyman, some giant wasps and that big prawn. But they still didn't realise that that meant they were rubbish. It's quite sweet, really.'

The Cyberman, who is even now stooping slightly to pass through the door in the bus wall, seems designed to illustrate Iris' point. If ever a ruthless killing machine could be said to look sweet, this is that machine. Seven foot high in matte silver boots and with stylised teardrops at the corner of each eye, the Cyberman looks like nothing so much as Mick Ronson in full-on *Spiders* mode. The resemblance is compounded by the t-shirt it's wearing, which reads 'It's smokin' at the Crystal Bucket' above an image of an anthropomorphised horse smoking a long, fat cigarette.

'Most excellent,' the Cyberman says in an affected Californian drawl, 'she's totally crashed.'

He beckons impatiently at the door and starts down the stairs, certain as only a Cyberman can be that he will be followed.

∞

Three figures, each smaller than the Cyberman, hurriedly slip through the door and quickly push it shut behind them.

In the dim light, it would be difficult to definitively identify the tallest of the three, who stands head and shoulders above the other two and is already halfway down the stairs, but the identity of the two smaller, squatter bodies moving towards the stairwell is evident.

Sontarans are clones and should, in theory, be utterly identical. However, unknown processes in the massive cloning vats on Sontara add minor differences to each batch, so that in reality individual Sontaran foot-soldiers can be differentiated from one another by

certain subtle clues. Number of fingers is a popular method of identification, but there are others.

In this case, things are made particularly simple by the fact that one Sontaran is wearing a hat with a feather in it, and the other a leather jacket with 'Danny Pain' in metal studs across the back.

Feather Hat clenches his fist together, then re-opens it and points his two fingers at the stairs. Leather Jacket thuds his three-fingered fist into his chest and moves downstairs.

Feather Hat brings up the rear, clutching awkwardly at the stair rail as he descends.

∞

Having slept through an assortment of alien killers wandering through her bedroom, it's a little unfortunate that the sound of the bus door closing wakes Iris up. She sits bolt upright and pushes the pillow to the floor.

'Who the hell's there? I can bloody well see you, you know!' she shouts unconvincingly as she swings herself woozily out of bed, picking up the gin bottle in one easy motion.

She slips her feet into fluffy pink bunny slippers and moves carefully into the semi-darkness, heading towards the inexplicable crack of light.

∞

The aliens' plan is a simple one.

Sneak off the bus and head into the nearest city with a space port.

Find the seediest looking hostelry in the port.

Pay some grimy captain a large chunk of cash to take them all home.

'It seemed so straightforward back on the bus,' Feather Hat is complaining bitterly. 'And yet here we are. Skulking in the dark, like Rutan scum, awaiting the arrival of this criminal.'

He turns and slaps the other Sontaran on the shoulder. 'We wish to return to the Throneworld. Is that not true, K'Meran?'

K'Meran nods, all the while scanning the end of the alleyway in which they are currently standing. He has an unwieldy plastic rifle clutched precariously in his hands, his thick fingers constantly slipping on the slick coating.

'Hey, watch where you're pointing that thing!'

The final member of the alien party stretches out an arm and pushes the barrel of the rifle to one side before turning away again, examining the far end of the alley. K'Meran could have sworn that the arm had literally stretched to reach the gun, but what could you expect from an Auton?

∞

Autons gave K'Meran chills down his vent.

Especially this one, the only Auton he'd ever heard of who could operate millions of miles and thousands of years away from the Nestene Consciousness. He'd been told in basic training that no Auton could function without the power of the Consciousness, and yet there was no denying the effectiveness of this particular example.

Graeme claimed to have started life as a guerrilla serving utensil of some description and, for all that K'Meran was unsure of what that indicated specifically, he understood that it was a military position and therefore worthy of some respect. More respect, certainly, that was due the Cyberman.

A pacifist Cyberman! Again, his training led him to believe that this was impossible – and again, empirical evidence demonstrated that it was his training which was in error. For a time, he and Commander Storn had considered that either the Auton or the Cyberman (or both) might be Rutan infiltrators, but as time had passed and various anti-Rutan poisons had failed to harm either of them in the slightest, they had agreed that both aliens were as exactly what they claimed to be.

No matter, K'Meran thinks, as he reaches back to scratch a sudden itch round his probic vent – and stops suddenly as a voice speaks in his ear.

'Good evening, gentlemen. I'm Nathan Dexter and I have a laser right against the neck of this Sontaran, so don't try any funny stuff. Shall we go inside for a drink?'

∞

Iris has made it to the back the bus without mishap and is now beginning to feel a little foolish. She takes a generous slug from the bottle and leaves it on a small table covered in possibly – but not probably – antique pill boxes, and then runs a finger along the crack of light emanating from the small section of wall at the top of the stairs.

'Silly old bugger,' she mutters to herself, 'It's just the handbag cupboard'. She pushes one section of the wall and the crack widens then opens fully, revealing a pocket universe which Iris had installed some time previously in order to house her burgeoning collection of handbags, shoes and assorted accessories. Then there had been that unfortunate incident where she'd stuck all her memories onto Marlion recording crystals and Panda had smashed one and she'd forgotten all about the Handbag Universe.

'I bet this place is packed full of great stuff I've completely forgotten about,' she says, as she parts the bead curtain barring the entrance and pokes her head in.

∞

The pub is dingy and dirty, in truth little cleaner than the alleyway outside. Even so, it's obviously popular enough, with sufficient gossiping patrons to cover the sound of individual conversation, and a queue at the bar. There are even a few other non-humans in the room, but the Sontarans and the Cyberman still stand out and, until they move into a shadowy corner, draw inquisitive glances.

Graeme has just lit a cigarette with a handy lighter attachment, and is jabbing it like a knife in Dexter's direction.

'Look, Mr Dexter, all we want is to get back to our own people. We all been stuck on the Bus for a long time and we want to go home.'

The Cyberman looks up, but the Auton cuts him off before he can speak.

'I know, I know – you were just looking for a lift home because you were in no state to drive yourself.'

'Completely wasted, man,' the Cyberman agrees, shaking his head ruefully.

'But the rest of us got sent onto the Bus for a reason and then deserted there,' the Auton concluded. 'We need to get home and explain what happened to us.

Dexter shifts uneasily in his chair; clears his throat. If the aliens could read human body language better they would already know that there is no good news coming.

'Thing is,' he says quietly, 'I can get you all off this planet. The ship's ready and waiting five minutes away. I've got permits to take off and leave local space and I can get hold of others that'll take us to the places you think you want to go to.'

The Auton tries to interrupt now, but Dexter continues inexorably on, determined to make himself clear.

'What I can't do though is take you all home. Even if I could, I don't know if you really want to go there.'

'Wait a minute,' he says, raising a hand as the Sontarans heave themselves to their feet. 'Hold on while I explain.'

'You,' he says to the Cyberman, 'Uncle Tom Kroton. Do you really think that the Cyberleader will welcome you home with open arms? This is thousands of years before your time. The Cyberlord Hegemony won't appear for millennia. Just now what pass for your ancestors are skulking gypsies, wandering round the cosmos in a handful of stolen spaceships, killing or enslaving everyone they meet.'

'And you two.' Dexter twists in his chair and points his glass at the Sontarans. 'For Goddess' sake, Sontara's gone and you're not even Purebloods! The best you can hope for is to do a runner, get away as far as you can and see if you can get signed on with the Hierarchy out in the Delta Quadrant.'

'As for you,' he continues, gesturing at the Auton, 'everything's changed with the Consciousness too. It's nothing like you remember – you go back there and the best you can hope for is that they melt you down.'

The aliens sit back in thought. There's a lot to take in.

∞

Iris' prowling and meandering through the Handbag Universe has taken an hour or so, and has left her none the wiser but considerably thirstier.

This is much bigger than I remember, she thinks. *I don't think I've ever had enough money to buy something this bloody big.*

I wonder if it's anything to do with this little bugger?

She reaches over and gently prods a finger into the golden fabric of a small clutch bag which is lying on a nearby display table.

It's surely not supposed to be throbbing and pulsating like that, is it? It's not natural, that: a handbag wheezing away like one of Darth Vader's lungs.

I should really throw the damn thing away if it's going to go reconfiguring the bus willy-nilly. Or leave it on this planet somewhere. There's bound to be someone I can palm it off on. There was a monastery or something on the way in, for a start.

She picks the bag up and slips an arm delicately through the strap, pausing only to curse loudly as she contrives to pour at least a double of neat gin down herself in the process.

More worrying than lost alcohol, however, are the obvious signs of habitation. Someone has jerry-rigged what looks suspiciously like a Sontaran feeder unit from two

pairs of sling-backs Iris had been given by Valerie Solanos and the electronic innards of a twenty-third century iBag, for a start.

'Now, when did I last bump into those no-neck little buggers? That time I was back on Gallifrey, claiming the High Presidency and shanghai-ing those Vardans, I reckon. I could've sworn I'd chucked them all off the bus, though.'

Moving further in, she comes across a shelf hanging in mid-air with a small line of neatly folded XXXL t-shirts on it, each bearing the name of a pub or restaurant in one garish colour or other.

Other minor signs of inhabitation become obvious as Iris takes the long way back to the door – a large pile of soft shoulder bags have been dumped on the floor and obviously used as a bed; someone has torn the stuffing from dozens of teddy bears (now where did they come from – friends of Panda's maybe?) and arranged it into a kind of burrow, and there's pretty explicit graffiti across several walls.

But there's definitely no-one actually there. Iris searches every nook and cranny, sticking her head round every corner and shoving her arm into every dark recess. Could she have bought the universe like this? Maybe she'd made the mess herself – or more likely it had been Flossie on a drunken doggy rampage; or Jenny, hiding out after yet another crushingly embarrassing bout of Time Travellers' Tummy? The graffiti at least sounded like something almost any of her various companions could have written.

Still, there was no-one around now and no lasting damage appeared to have been done.

Anyway, company was company, when all was said and done.

Jenny had skittered off and Benny had dumped her (well OK, she had dumped Benny, but still, there had been definite dumping); Harriet had skipped town while her back was turned and whatshisface… Captain Turner had married that wolf, but one way or another they'd all left. Even Tom had run off with a big bear of a man in the end, declaring his Van Dyke beard to be 'incredibly tickly on the thighs'. He'd taken Panda with him too, the sod.

'And here's me, all on my own. Even he's gone now. Last of the Time Lords, that's me.'

Suddenly maudlin, she kicks at a stray pink mule and begins to walk back to the exit. There's a bottle of something under her bed, she's sure, and *Brief Encounter* must still be in the video from the last time she'd seen the Doctor.

A good cry always does you good, she decides and with a huge sniff she steps back onto the top floor of the bus.

∞

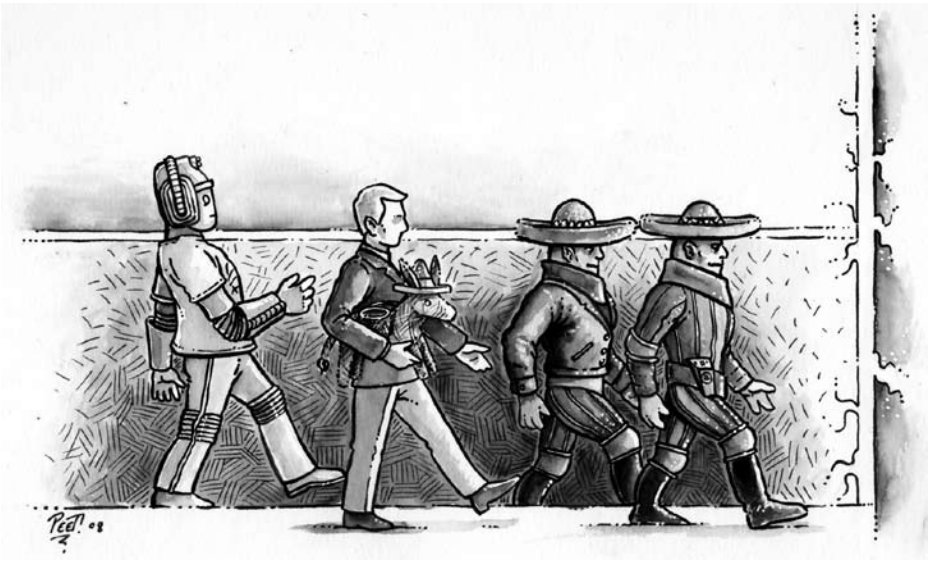
Much later, the aliens return and unsteadily creep up the bus stairs.

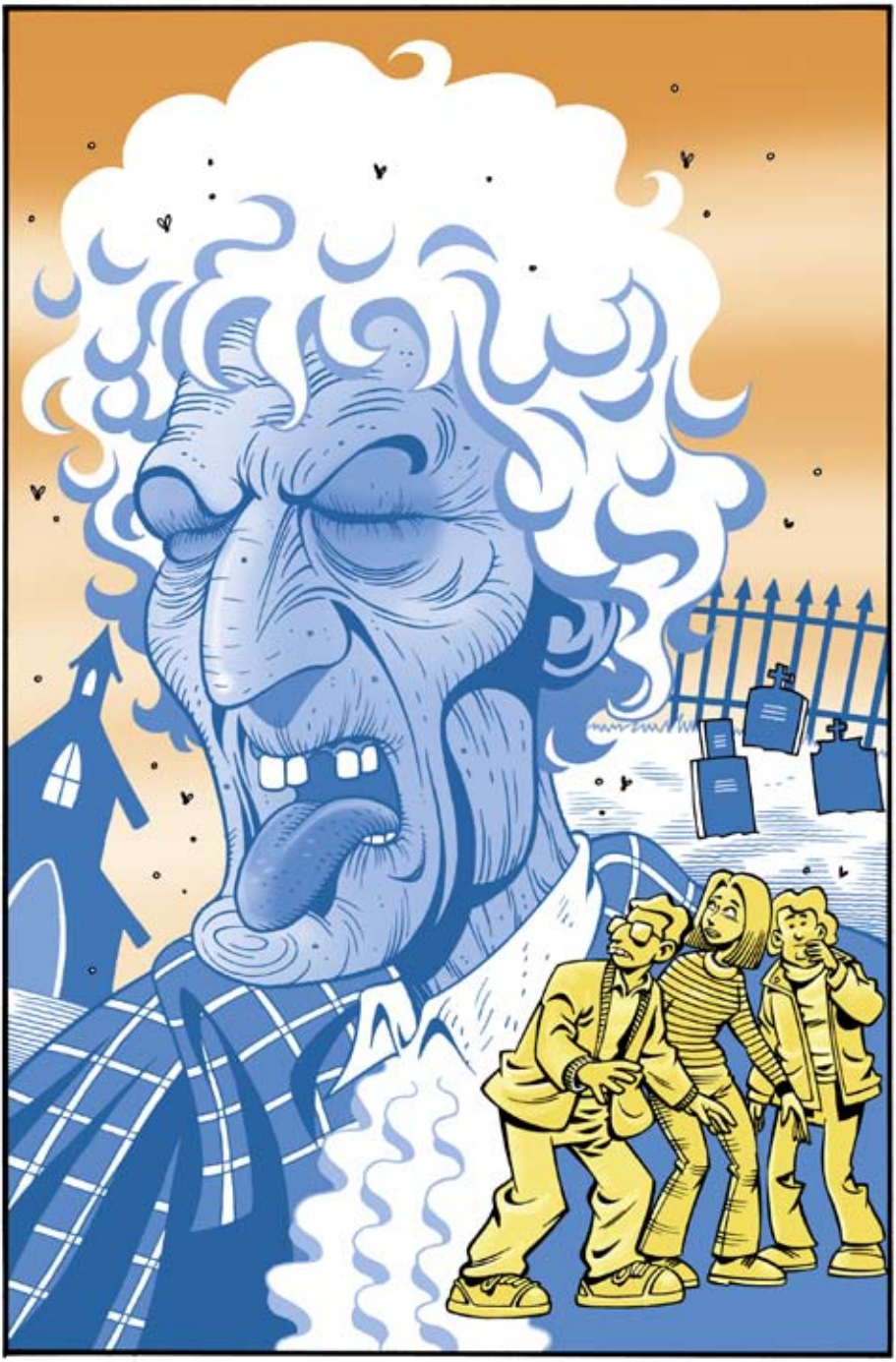
The Sontarans are both wearing sombreros, the Auton is carrying a raffia donkey and, bringing up the rear, the Cyberman is proudly pulling on a t-shirt with the slogan 'Hard Rock Cafe, Artaris' emblazoned across the chest.

They freeze for a moment when they see the open door and sleeping Iris, but know from long experience that she tends to dismiss anything unlikely which may have occurred whilst she was drunk.

They go through into the Handbag Universe and make sure to switch off the light nearest the door, before tying the door handle to a pole some distance away and taping up every point at which light might escape through the door crack.

Then they wander into the interior of their universe, glad to be home.





Location

Paul Ebbs

The last time I saw Craig, he bought me dinner – he'd asked for some tips about breaking into TV and it's always a good idea to offer me food if you want something from me. Craig was canny like that – he had the measure of me. We were eating in a Thai place just up the road from the Tavern. We drank too much (and he knew he shouldn't have been, he kept telling me that, as he got another round in against my protestations) he was on good form, brilliant form actually and we put the world to rights, sorted out the problems with Doctor Who *in all mediums, slagged off the people we didn't like in* Doctor Who *and said great things about the people we did like. Typical fan politics and dark grudges. He sparkled. It was fun, relaxed and like it was every time I had a drink with Craig an enlightening and affirming experience.*

I'll miss him a great deal. I think he'd have made a brilliant maths teacher, and it's a shame he didn't get the chance to follow that particular career path. I haven't been to the Tavern since he died. I don't expect it'll be the same place.

What you're about to read is a script for a audio play I wrote for Stuart Robinson's FANZ *group. It's outrageously irreverent and it has some terribly camp and dirty jokes. Just like Craig.*

01. INT. INSIDE AN ECHOING EVIL PLACE.

[A SAVAGE ORCHESTRAL CRESCENDO RISES IN TERRIFYING CHORDS.

FROM THE BOWELS OF HELL COMES A TERRIFYING DEEP BOOMING EVIL LAUGH.

THE LAUGH GROWS IN INTENSITY TO BECOME PROBABLY THE MOST EVIL NOISE OF ALL TIME.

IT THEN DESCENDS INTO THE MOST EVIL COUGHING FIT OF ALL TIME.]

NORTHERN MINION
Strepsil, oh Dark One?

DARK ONE
Yes, all this brimstone plays havoc on my mucous membrane.

NORTHERN MINION
We've just had word from….up there….everything is ready.

DARK ONE
The Snookvassels are completely fungegruddly?

NORTHERN MINION
A little on the damp side, but ostensibly, yes.

DARK ONE
We have Forklingbuswanks in the siddlepiss?

NORTHERN MINION
Again my Dark Lord, there is evidence of crinkling around the edges, but otherwise…

DARK ONE
And….

(BEAT)

Graham?

NORTHERN MINION
Still an arse bandit, but you can't have everything.

DARK ONE
Then everything is ready. The omens are in the sky and the circle is complete. The cube has six sides and the oranges have many dimples. I look deep into the abyss and I embrace the darkness! (EVIL LAUGH)

[WE HEAR A LIGHT SWITCH]

NORTHERN MINION
Is it any better now I've turned the light on?

DARK ONE
Many thanks.

NORTHERN MINION
That's the trouble with Abysses – buggers to light and you can never get to all the nooks and crannies to clean them completely. Anyway, I'm up topside now to set the plans in motion.

DARK ONE
Leave the Strepsils – I have much laughing to do.

CUT TO:

O2. INT. PUB. EVENING.

[PUB ATMOS.]

JONATHON
Great. You know, Gary, I can't wait for tomorrow. I'm ***so*** excited. I've never been to an actual *Doctor Who* location before.

GARY
Oh no, I can't wait either. Nineteen hours squashed into Cindy's car, driving to Wiltshire, with you wittering on about the iconoclastic subtext of the Pertwee era, and how the Doctor's apparent acquiescence to the military authority figures of the time was, in fact, a wonderfully pitched subversion of the status quo, marking Pertwee out, not as a lap dog to the Establishment, but as a rebel, neatly skewering the mores and excesses of societal complacency on the rapier of his wit.

JONATHON
How did you know I was planning to lead a discussion on that very issue?

GARY
Because you're a twat, Jonathon. That's how.

(BEAT)
Tom, have we sorted out the bloody directions to this place yet?

TOM

Well, according to the map, you drive to the back of beyond, drive beyond the back of that, go a bit further, turn left at the arse end of nowhere…

GRAHAM (OVER TOM)

Can we stop there for a nibble?

TOM

…drive straight through where the buses don't run and Bob's your uncle, you arrive in Aldbourne.

(BEAT)

Well, something like that. Cindy's been looking it up on the internet.

CINDY

Well, I *think* I got directions to Aldbourne. The screen kept flashing "Aldbourne? You're one of those Wanky Doctor Who Fans, Aren't you?" at me before it would let me print anything up. Who'd have thought the RAC would have had such a sense of humour?

KATE

Well I don't know why we're going to Aldbourne in the first place! If there's one story that represents everything I hate about the cosy institutionalised sexism of the seventies it would be the Day-ee-mons!

GARY

The what?

KATE

The Day-ee-mons.

GARY

Day-ee-mons? It's not pronounced Day-ee-mons! It's pronounced Dee-aye-mons.

JONATHON

I think you'll find Gary, in my copy of "The Oxford Guide To Words With That Funny AE Character In That No One Uses Anymore" that it's pronounced Day-ee-oo-mons.

[GARY RIPS UP THE BOOK.]

GARY
Not any more it doesn't.

KATE
Day-ee-mons!

GARY
Dee-aye-mons!

KATE
Day-ee-mons!

GARY
Dee-aye-mons! And the first person to sing "Let's Call the Whole thing off" gets punched in the throat.

TOM
Look, will you two please stop arguing? We're drawing enough glances across the bar as it is without causing a scene.

GRAHAM
Oh, you're not going on about my trousers again are you, Tom?

TOM
Well, I think the landlord would prefer it if you were wearing some, yes.

GRAHAM
He's never complained about my lurex posing pouch before.

CINDY
Well, usually you wear it the *right way round*. It looks like two pink damsons that have been run over by a bicycle. It's putting me off my beer. Talking of beer, Jeff's taking an awfully long time with this round.

GARY

His time at the bar is proof of a direct correlation between the length of the order and the severity of his confusion.

(BEAT)

Here he comes now. Oooh, scrunchy face, he's very confused.

[CLINK OF GLASSES AS JEFF HANDS AROUND THE DRINKS. VARIOUS NON-PLUSSED THANK-YOUS]

JEFF
Right, that's Matteus Rose and Tequila for you Tom; Guinness with a Gherkin floating in the top for you, Cindy; Jonathon, you've got the Perrier and Advocaat, sorry there were no Smarties; Graham, yours is the Pink Gin and Butane…

GRAHAM
Well, at least he got mine right.

JEFF
Kate, this is your Cider Eggnog, and, Gary, yours is the stick with the notches gouged into it. The Battery Acid is mine.

CINDY
Battery Acid? Is that some kind of new cocktail?

JEFF
No.

[JEFF GULPS DOWN HIS DRINK, THERE IS A HISS OF SIZZLING FLESH, AND HE BURPS.]

JEFF
Really clears the pipes.

[ANOTHER GULP, HISS AND BURP.

ORCHESTRAL CRESCENDO FROM SCENE ONE.]

TO:
Graham! Are you alright?

GRAHAM (FULL EXORCIST MODE, BEGIN WITH EVIL LAUGH)
The Circle is complete! The Omens are in the Sky. The Orange has many dimples!

[THUD AS HE FALLS FORWARD ONTO THE TABLE AND ALL THE GLASSES SMASH.]

KATE
He's fainted.

JEFF
Too much Butane, I'll go and tick off the barman, he's always doing that to me.

TOM
Jeff, wait! It wasn't the butane, he hasn't touched his drink. Hang on, he's coming round.

[VARIOUS GROGGY WAKING UP NOISES FROM GRAHAM.]

GRAHAM
Ohhh, my head. What are you all staring at?

GARY
You! Suddenly you went all rigid…

GRAHAM
Must adjust this posing pouch…

GARY
No, ***you*** went all rigid, your eyes rolled back into your head, you started to dribble, and speak in this evil scary voice….

GRAHAM
Did I?

EVERYONE

Yes!

GRAHAM
Like I said, I really must adjust this posing pouch – I'll do it on the way home. Must dash, everyone, see you at Cindy's tomorrow at nine.

JEFF
Weird.

CINDY
I'll say.

JEFF
I thought we were meeting at ***ten.***

CUT TO:

03. CRYPT BENEATH THE CHURCH. ALDBOURNE. DAY.

[SINISTER MUSIC. ECHOING ATMOS, FOOTSTEPS ON STONE, A DRIP FROM THE CEILING]

NORTHERN MINION
Now, you all understand what you've got to do?

[VARIOUS YESSES FROM THE ASSEMBLED CROWD OF VILLAGERS.]

PUBLICAN
They must suspect that everything is normal in the village?

NORTHERN MINION
Everything. You must run your pub as usual, nothing must change in your attitude that would make them suspect anything is amiss.

PUBLICAN
So I'm to be rude, dismissive and suspicious of strangers?

NORTHERN MINION
Exactly. All you villagers must act as you normally would to Doctor Who fans. What is our mantra?

EVERYONE (INTONED, SLOWLY AND WITHOUT INFLECTION)
Oh no. Not another bunch of weirdos.
Why do they always come here?
Christ, this programme was made over 30 years ago, haven't you got anything better to do?
Get a job, better still, get a girlfriend, and use some anti-dandruff shampoo, for God's sake.
No. None of us thought the real church had been blown up, what do you think we are? Spastic or something?
Look, just take your pictures and bloody piss off.

NORTHERN MINION
Excellent. When they arrive tomorrow, they'll never suspect a thing! Now, leave the crypt and return to your houses. I have much work to do.

PUBLICAN
What work?

NORTHERN MINION
Well, obviously I haven't got any real work to do; it's just a convenient way of ending the scene.

PUBLICAN
Oh, I see.

NORTHERN MINION
It drives the plot on; much better than leaving the scene hanging, like this.

CUT TO:

04. EXT. OUTSIDE CINDY'S HOUSE. DAY.

[STREET ATMOS, CARS GOING BY ETC.]

JEFF
Sorry I'm late everyone. I thought we were meeting at 9.37.

TOM
You're on time. It's nine o'clock.

JEFF
Ah but my watch is three weeks fast.

TOM
Why?

JEFF
So I don't miss the gannet-breeding season, of course.

TOM
Riiiiiiight. I knew the question was a mistake the moment it left my lips.

GRAHAM
That's just what I said when I got out of bed this morning.

CINDY
Feeling better, Graham?

GRAHAM
Fit as a fiddle, my dear. And I must say, darling, ***you're*** looking particularly gorgeous this morning.

CINDY
Why thank you.

GRAHAM
I was talking to Tom.

CINDY
Oh…

[TOM COUGHS WITH EMBARRASSMENT.]

GARY
So let me get this right, because when I was being sarcastic about it last night, I didn't really think it would actually turn out this way, but the seven of us, are going to drive to Wiltshire in this Lada?

KATE
It's going to be a bit of a squeeze. I demand to sit in the front with Cindy, I don't want to be frotted by any of you lot.

GARY
There's more chance of Michael Barrymore suggesting we all go back to his place for a party and a bit of a swim. I'd rather rub myself up against Bella Emberg than you.

KATE
Thank you for that image, Gary; anybody got a bowl I can vomit into?

JONATHON
Now, right, I've drawn a diagram of how think the five of us blokes can fit into the back of Cindy's Lada. I've photocopied them all, so I'll just pass them around.

[PAPERS BEING HANDED ROUND.]

TOM
Looks a bit…

JEFF
Is that one me? Or is that?

TOM
..complicated. I don't think I can lift my leg up to…

GARY
I am not sitting on Graham's lap!

GRAHAM

Oh go on, Gary, we can talk about the first thing that goes up.

GARY
That joke is so old it plays at 78rpm. And anyway, it's Comes Up. Not Goes Up.

GRAHAM
I know what I meant.

CINDY
Right, come on then, everyone in.

[CAR DOORS OPENING AND VARIOUS COMEDY GRUNTS FROM THE BOYS AS THEY SQUEEZE INTO THE CAR.

LOTS OF COMEDY RUBBERY NOISES, AND THEN THE CAR DOORS SLAMMING.

WHEN WE'RE WITH THE BOYS THE ACOUSTIC IS TIGHT, VOICES ARE DISTORTED BY SQUASHED FACES.]

TOM
Well, it's more comfortable than it looks.

JONATHON
I broke sixteen Action Men working out the right combination. It took all night.

GRAHAM
Reminds me of the time when I was in the SAS.

TOM
You were in the SAS?

GRAHAM
Well, not all of them.

CINDY
Right then off we go!

[CAR ENGINE STARTS AND WE DRIVE OFF.]

GARY

Graham, would you mind getting your finger out of my ear?

GRAHAM

That's not my finger.

CUT TO:

05. INT. INTERNAL MONOLOGUE WITH CAR.

[ENGINE ATMOS.

STIRRING RUSSIAN MARTIAL MUSIC THROUGHOUT.]

CAR: (THICK RUSSIAN ACCENT) So, again I am to beink abused! You never wash me; you only put oil in me when I start make wheezing clunky noise like asthmatic washing machine! You never hoover my insides! My doors are filled with crisp packets and squashed cans of capitalist pig-dog Coca-Cola! And on top of all of this you fill me up with weirdos and homos and all of them are Doctor Who fans! Blyatch! Oh the shame of it! Is no way to treat symbol of glorious Soviet engineering! From totalitarian regime that brought world vodka, Cosmonauts and cheeky gymnasts with big nipples, the Lada is pinnacle of Communist achievement, and all you want to do is drive me down to capitalist pig-dog Wiltshire, so that you may deify the propagandist pig-dog BB bloody C and the capitalist pig--dog Doctor Frilly-Shirted-Bastard Who-ey! Piz-dyetz! Do you know why Doctor Who is no Russian? Because it's shit! Gav-no! That's why! But Cindy of the Capitalist Pig-Dog Doctor Frilly-Shirted- Bastard Lovers, I will have my revenge! I *will* have my revenge!

CUT TO:

06. INT. CAR INTERIOR. DAY.

[CAR ATMOS.]

KATE

Did you hear that?

CINDY
What?

KATE
There was a funny noise coming from the engine.

CINDY
I didn't hear anything. Turn the radio up.

[TINNY RUSSIAN MARTIAL MUSIC.]

KATE
Can't you change it to another station?

CINDY
It's the only station I can get.

CUT TO:

07. INT. INTERNAL MONOLOGUE WITH CAR.

[ATMOS AS BEFORE.]

CAR:
You like my music, capitalist pig-dogs? You hear my stern marching tunes? Suka sin! All the way to Capitalist-Pig-Dog-Wiltshire! All the way! Revenge! Revenge!

CUT TO:

08. EXT. VILLAGE GREEN ALDBOURNE.

[PEACEFUL QUIET, ATMOS, BIRDS SINGING, ESTABLISH THIS FOR A FEW SECONDS. THEN…

CAR IN THE DISTANCE, WITH TINNY RUSSIAN MARTIAL MUSIC IN THE MIX.

CAR GETS NEARER AND NEARER.

CUT ENGINE. KEEP MUSIC. DOORS OPEN. MUSIC IS TINNY AND VERY LOUD.

REVERSE SQUEEZING NOISES AND POPS AS THE GUYS GET OUT OF THE BACK, THEY ARE BREATHLESS AND GLAD TO BE OUT.

THE ARE TAKING DEEP BREATHS.]

CINDY
Aldbourne! Whahey!

TOM
Thank god we're out of there.

JONATHON
(SNIFFING) Ahhhh smell that. The authentic smell of the country.

GARY
Yeah, it's all right if you like the smell of cow shit. Where's the pub?

TOM
Over there.

[CLICK CLICK AS CINDY TRIES TO TURN OFF THE RADIO.]

CINDY
Weird, I can't turn off the radio.

[WE HEAR KATE KICKING THE RADIO SAVAGELY UNTIL IT GOES OFF.]

KATE
I think the switch was stuck. It isn't now.

CINDY
There isn't a switch anymore.

KATE
Shame. No Russian marching music on the way home. I'm gutted.

CAR: (DISTANT, IN PAIN)
Suka pro klataya! Capitalist pig-dog lesbian…

[CAR DOORS SLAM.]

JONATHON
Great. The Village. It looks ***just*** like it did in the….

GARY
Watch it, Jonathon….

JONATHON
In the

(CAREFULLY)

Dayeeooarrryouu-mens?

GARY
What did I tell you?

JONATHON
I can't remember.

GARY
It's Day-ee-mons

KATE

See I told you it was!

GARY
I mean Dee-aye-mons!

KATE
I'm sorry, I must accept your first answer.

GARY
Bugger.

TOM
Right I'm for a drink. Let's get to the pub.

CINDY
Good idea.

[THERE IS A YELL OF PAIN FROM GRAHAM.]

GRAHAM (FULL ON EXORCIST)
The Nagglefurters are pingeworthy, and the Cats are hairy on the inside! The Time is Now!!!!!!

[THUD AS HE FAINTS TO THE FLOOR.]

CINDY
He's fainted *again*!

TOM
Jeff!
JEFF
I didn't give him anything!

KATE
Graham! Graham, are you alright?

GRAHAM (GROGGILY)

The brontosaurus is a large placid animal, with a huge….What? Yes I'm perfectly fine, thank you. Stop fussing; there was obviously not much air in the car.

TOM
Well if you're sure you're alright…okay, who's for the pub?

GRAHAM
If it's all the same to you, I'll check out the church. There may be a choirboy or two bending over to do up their shoelaces, whom I might accidentally bump into. Ahem.

TOM
What about the rest of you?

JONATHON
Well, me and Jeff are going to start marking off the locations on this map and locations book, great.

GRAHAM
And I thought I was the most anal one here. Ciao.

GARY
Well after that journey I *need* a drink, so I'll come with you and Cindy.

KATE
Well I'll come to the pub too. But don't stand or sit next to me, Gary, at *any* time. I don't want us to look like we're all on a sad double date.

GARY
The only date you'd get out of me is Friday the 13th.

CINDY
This should be fun.

CUT TO:

09. INT. UPSTAIRS ROOM AT THE PUB. DAY

NORTHERN MINION
Excellent. They're splitting up. Graham is going to the church as arranged. I'll meet him there. You go downstairs to the bar and greet the others. I'll send our rank agent of the occult to deal with the others.

PUBLICAN
Is that all you wanted be to come up here for? Just to tell me that?

NORTHERN MINION
Didn't they teach you anything about ***exposition*** at the Henchman Academy?

PUBLICAN
I was sick that day.

NORTHERN MINION
Tch! Jump to it!

CUT TO:

10. EXT. OUTSKIRTS OF THE VILLAGE. DAY.

[LOVELY SUMMERS DAY ATMOS, BUT AS JEFF AND JONATHON WALK ON WE GET THAT SOUND OF THE HEAT BARRIER FROM THE DAEMONS.]

JONATHON
This is so brilliant! This is the actual road that Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart and the Doctor met at the heat barrier in the Dee-you-are-mons. I can mark it off on the map here and put a big red tick in that brilliant *Doctor Who On Location* book that I only paid 98 pounds for on Ebay.

JEFF
Er Jonathon.

JONATHON
Isn't it great that there are books like *Doctor Who on Location* for us to buy? I don't know how I coped before getting it. Can't wait for the sequel, 'Television Sets of the Seventies

that May Have Shown Doctor Who'. Only three hundred quid from Laugh-all-the-way-to-the-bank Publications. Great.

JEFF
Jonathon…I think now would be a good time for us to stop walking…

JONATHON
I mean, just look at the quality of that indexing, even the cross references are cross referenced, and the Contents are so detailed they run for seventeen pages. Some people might call that a cynical ploy to push up the page count, but not me, Fab, and it's even got a foreword by Sylvester McCoy – I bet he was so busy with tons of acting work and film roles and being successful that he had to put off writing it for months and months. Super!

[BANG! SIZZLE AS JONATHON HITS THE HEAT BARRIER.

A YELL FROM JONATHON.]

JONATHON
The book and the map! Up in smoke!

JEFF
I did try to tell you. Just where it was in the Dee-oy-are-yo-mans, there's a heat barrier-

JONATHON
There is. Don't touch it!

[BANG. SIZZLE.]

JEFF (SLIGHTLY MUFFLED)
Yum. Tastes of Raspberry.

CUT TO:

11. INT. THE PUB. DAY.

[GENERAL PUB ATMOS.]

PUBLICAN
How many times have I got to tell you, we don't serve none of those fancy London drinks in this pub.

TOM
You don't serve beer?

PUBLICAN
Right.

CINDY
What do you serve?

PUBLICAN
Locals.

GARY
Look, I'll try and talk in words of one syllable, so that you understand. We have come far from big village called Col-ches-ter. We are thirsty, and need drinks.

PUBLICAN
All we have is Ramsbottom Ale or Sheep Scrotum Srumpy.

KATE
Is that all?

PUBLICAN
Not allowed to stock anything else since we became a theme pub. But I can do you a nice steak and chip platter, with as many trips as you want to the salad bar.

TOM
Four Ramsbottoms.

GARY
Oh come on Tom, that's not fair, from this angle I think Kate's backside is only *two* ramsbottoms, with perhaps a shire horse thrown in for good measure.

PUBLICAN
Are you insulting a lady, you fancy London tosspot?

GARY
No, I was insulting Kate.

PUBLICAN
Well that's alright then. I may have sold the pub to a chain of gross, culturally-stagnant, uber-consumerist multinational breweries with all the social morals of a rampaging mob of lobotomised Millwall supporters, but I won't have a bad word said against a lady.

KATE
Atavistic Little Englander. I don't need you to defend me.

PUBLICAN:
Alright, in that case: Fat-arse.

CINDY
Four pints of ramsbottom please.

PUBLICAN
Eleven eighty.

[SOUNDS OF PINTS BEING PULLED.]

TOM
Eleven eighty? Four pints? I see you've still got fancy London prices.

PUBLICAN
I've got an entry in the Michelin Guide.

CINDY (WHISPERING)
And I bet it reads. 'Wanker'.

CUT TO:

12. EXT. HEAT BARRIER. DAY.

[ATMOS AS BEFORE.

EVERY SO OFTEN JEFF GRUNTS AS HE HEAVES SOMETHING INTO THE AIR. THERE IS A PUPPY YELPING, A BANG AND A SIZZLE.]

JONATHON
But this is great, fantastic; the heat barrier is completely surrounding the village. You do realise what this means, don't you?

JEFF
That a thirty year old television programme has become reality, and we are living out the twisted storyline of the Hyundi-mons.

[HEAVE, KITTEN MIAOWS, SIZZLE]

JONATHON
Hyundi-mons?

JEFF
Sorry. I meant Daewoo-mons.

[HEAVE, BAA, SIZZLE]

JONATHON
This is incredible; the whole reality-fiction event horizon must have shifted on its axis! We have become part of the fiction and the fiction has become the part of the fact! Great!

(BEAT)

Are we any nearer finding out how high the heat barrier is yet?

JEFF:
No. And I'm

[HEAVE, PUPPY, SIZZLE]

nearly out of test subjects.

JONATHON:
Better save the rest for later, put them back in the bag.

[FRENZIED PUPPIES AND KITTENS BEING STUFFED IN A BAG.]

JONATHON
Hang on, there's someone coming along the road.

JEFF
Quick, it's the RSPCA! Hide. Run. Commit suicide!

JONATHON
No it's not, it's an old woman dressed as a witch and her face looks full of exposition.

HAWTHORN
I am Mrs Hawthorn, I have come to bring you back to the village; where I will smuggle you unnoticed into tonight's secret meeting of the secret coven in the secret crypt beneath the church.

JONATHON
Told you so.

CUT TO:

13. INT. THE PUB.

[PUB ATMOS AS BEFORE.]

TOM
This Ramsbottom ale is disgusting.

CINDY
Why is that your third pint then?

TOM
Well, after the second pint it doesn't taste any worse.

KATE
These pork scratchings aren't any better, they taste like they've been picked from the bellies of syphilitic pigs.

CINDY:
What does it say in the ingredients?

[RUSTLING OF PACKET.]

KATE
Every morning before dawn, our best operatives with the longest finger nails creep silently into the pig hospital and…Ughhhhhh!!!!!!

GARY
There is something seriously weird about this place. Have you noticed?

KATE
You mean *apart* from the pork scratchings?

GARY
No, everybody's dressed up in seventies gear. Flares, big check shirts, greasy leather jackets. Look at that woman over there; she looks like a refugee from *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads*.

GEORDIE LASS
Divunt worry my canny lads, I waaaarn't give away the result of the football match.

TOM, CINDY, KATE.
Weird.

GARY
There is definitely something not right about this place.

[BELL RINGS FOR LAST ORDERS.]

PUBLICAN
Last orders gentlemen, please!

TOM
Last orders? It's only twelve thirty in the afternoon! I need at least another five pints or I won't feel I've been to the pub.

CINDY
You'll have to be quick.

TOM
Right. Barman. Table at the window, five rounds rapid.

CUT TO:

14. INT. CRYPT BENEATH THE CHURCH. NIGHT.

[ATMOS AS BEFORE. LOTS OF FEET TRAIPSING IN.

SINISTER MUSIC.]

NORTHERN MINION
That's it, everybody down to the crypt. Please take a cowl and vestment and put them on as quickly as possible… Very good… Now, Virgins to the front please – don't want you standing at the back looking scared like the last time do we? Now, fallen women? Where are the fallen women?

FALLEN WOMAN
Here.

NORTHERN MINION
One? I can't believe there's only one! Come on: more fallen women! You're certainly not a virgin, Mrs Grafton, I've eaten two of your children this week already. Now, that's it, over with the fallen women. Mr Dewer, I don't think you qualify as either a virgin or a fallen woman, whatever you might get up to in the vestry with the Reverend Magister and his Playtex bra. That's it, nice straight lines up and down the crypt. Nobody on the altar please, Mr Bridgestock. And if you could just cover yourself up – we've got more than enough

sacrifices tonight, thank you very much; I know you just want to be oiled by the virgins again, but everybody has to take their turn. And what would Mrs Bridgestock think if you were to come home all slippery again?

JEFF
I don't like it down here. That guy at the front with the horns, he looks really scary!

JONATHON: (WHISPERING)
Keep your voice down. We don't want to draw attention to ourselves.

(BEAT)

This is great. I've never been to a black mass before.

JEFF (WHISPERING)
I have.

JONATHON
You have?

JEFF
Mum took me when I was a boy. Lots of blacked up singers with straw hats and huge white lips, singing about steamboats wearing blazers.

JONATHON
That's not a Black Mass. That's the Black and White Minstrel Show!

JEFF
Either way, a product of the Devil or my uncle Nigel isn't a duck on Lake Windermere.

JONATHON
Come on, I want to get closer to the front.

JEFF
But that's where the virgins are.

JONATHON

We're Doctor Who fans.

JEFF:
Good plan.

CUT TO.

15. EXT. CHURCHYARD. NIGHT.

[OWLS HOOT, THE BELL IN THE TOWER OF THE CHURCH TOLLS SONOROUSLY. YES I AM A BLOODY WRITER, ALL RIGHT?]

CINDY
Flipping heck. It got dark quick.

GARY
And it's cold. I'm freezing my nuts off.

KATE
That shouldn't take long.

TOM (GROGGILY)
Remind me again: why are we in the graveyard?

CINDY
Oh, you've woken up again have you? At least we won't have to carry you around anymore. There was I thinking you were just making another wanky *Doctor Who* joke, five rounds rapid, barman, yawn yawn. I didn't think you were really going to drink five pints of Ramsbottom that quickly.

TOM
Carry me?

GARY
As soon as you finished the fifth pint, your eyes glazed over, you began dribbling and you began speaking incoherently…

[ORCHESTRAL MUSIC STAB FROM SCENE ONE.]

TOM

Like Graham this afternoon and last night?

CINDY

No. You kept shouting "I bloody bloody love you" at the top of your voice, and that you were sorry about the premature ejaculation problem and that it wouldn't happen again. Then you slid under the table and began sobbing into my a shoes.

TOM

Ah, so that wasn't a hideous, toe curling dream then. So what are we doing here?

KATE

As soon as the bar closed all the villagers left the pub in single file with blank faces and open mouths.

TOM

Some sort of mind control?

KATE

No, I don't think they'd ever seen a Londoner so pissed. Anyway, we followed them out of the pub and they all went up the church. We hid behind these gravestones until they'd gone in. Weird thing was, while we were waiting, we saw Jonathon and Jeff going in too.

TOM

Jonathan and Jeff?

GARY

We think there's some sort of black mass going on down in the crypt.

TOM

How can you be sure?

CINDY

The notice board. Look, just between where it says Jumble Sale and Coffee Morning in aid of the Afghan refugee crisis: Black Mass Tonight. Cowls Supplied. Virgins and Fallen

Women welcome.

KATE
Well, we'll have no trouble getting in then.

TOM
Jonathon and Jeff must be in terrible danger. We've got to get them out. If only I could stand up and co-ordinate properly. I'd better stay here while you go and rescue them.

GARY
Oh no, matey, you're not getting away with that. You're coming with us.

TOM
I can't go in there!

GARY
Why not.

TOM
I'm a muslim!

GARY
Bollocks you are, I've never seen you praying to Mecca.

TOM
I've prayed that I win the full house there.

CINDY
Right let's go.

TOM
Who put her in charge?

KATE
I did. Got a problem with that, Mr Premature Ejaculation?

TOM

No. Right. Let's go. If that's all right with you, Kate?

[ORCHESTRAL MUSIC STAB.]

CINDY
Wait. Look!

KATE
What?

CINDY
That gargoyle! It's coming to life!

[STONE LIKE GRINDING NOISES AND HISSING.]

TOM
It's Bok!

GARY:
It's bloody coming right for us! Run!

CUT TO:

16. INT. INTERNAL MONOLOGUE WITH CAR.

CAR
That's it, capitalist pig-dog bastards! Just leave me out in the cold all night! See if I care. I come from land of freezing steppes and big furry hat. Do you think one night out here in your cosy English summertime is going to be hurting me? I think not. Especially as my friend Tarquin at garage mix litre of vodka with every gallon of unleaded you put in, Cindy pig-dog! Whuis-taboi!

[WE CAN HEAR CINDY, AND THE OTHERS SCREAMING IN THE BACK GROUND.

AND BOK HISSING.]

CAR (LAUGHS EXTENSIVELY)
What pleasant turn up for books! Now you are going to beink abused and upset by big stone gargoyle! How amusing! Yes, run and panicking! That is just what Uncle Joe Stalin would have done with you, running-scared-capitalist-pig-dogs. Is what you get for inflicting Doctor bloody Zhivago on us! Yop-ti! Bastards! That's it Comrade Gargoyle, you get them and you squeeze life out of them like old potato! That's it! That's it! I want to see the fear on their faces as you rip them limb from limb!

CINDY
Get in the car! Get in the car!

[THE DOORS OPEN AND SLAM]

CINDY
Shut the window.

TOM
Right!

[WE HEAR THE WINDOW BEING ROLLED UP, OUTSIDE BOK IS HISSING, HE STARTS TO BANG ON THE CAR.]

GARY
So let me get this straight, in a Wiltshire village, surrounded by sturdy stone buildings and a huge stone church, we decide to hide in a Lada?

[MORE BANGING AND HISSING FROM OUTSIDE.]

CINDY
Well you didn't seem to have much of a plan. All you wanted to do was scream and wet your pants! (GLASS BREAKS, CINDY SCREAMS) The windows! Not the windows!

TOM
We've got to get out of here. Drive!

[KEYS IN IGNITION, THE CAR WON'T START.]

CINDY
It's bending my aerial! And the car won't bloody start!

KATE
It's going to break in!

[GLASS SMASHES, KATE SCREAMS]

I'd just to point out that I didn't scream then because of girly fear, but because I just realised that Jodie Foster is on Parkinson tonight and I forgot to set the video.

[CINDY KEEPS TURNING OVER THE ENGINE.]

CAR
I am not going to be starting until you apologise!!!

[THE CAR IS BEING TORN APART.]

CINDY
It's ripped off the bonnet!

TOM
Have you got third party fire and rampaging stone gargoyle?

KATE
What's going on here? It's like the Day-ooo-are-mens is coming to life around us. Gary, have you been putting mushrooms in our drinks again?

GARY
Even if I had, we wouldn't all be having the same trip would we?

CAR
I can wait all day, you know!

[MORE TWISTING AND TEARING OF METAL.]

[CINDY TRIES THE ENGINE AGAIN, NADA.]

TOM
Hang on, I'll hot wire it.

CINDY
Hot wire?

CAR
Hot wire? Blyatch!

[WIRES BEING RIPPED, THE CAR SCREAMS.]
[THE ENGINE ROARS TO LIFE.]

CAR
Bastards! Capitalist pig-dog car thief! Just you wait; first chance I get, I do that to *your* intestines!

TOM
Drive!

CINDY
Okay!

CAR
I still have control of steering wheel, capitalist pig-dogs! Round and round in circle, tovarich! In Soviet Russia, car drives you!

[FADE OUT OUR HEROES SCREAMS, BOK HISSING AND GROWLING AND THE CAR LAUGHING.]

CUT TO:

17. INT. IN THE CRYPT.

NORTHERN MINION
Right, you acolytes, I'd like you to put your bell, books and candles together, for the man

who's made this evening possible. Graham!

GRAHAM
Evening chaps, wonderful to be here again.

[FULL EXORCIST]

The Omens are in the Sky, the Cube is not a banana and the orange is looking pretty fruity to me.

[CHEERS AND WHOOPS OF DELIGHT FROM THE ATTENDANT CROWD.]

JONATHON
Bloody buggering flip. Not great. Not great one little bit at all.

JEFF
Pinch me.

JONATHON
I can assure you you're not dreaming.

JEFF
I know. I just fancied a –

JONATHON
There's no time for that!

[MINION AND GRAHAM APE FOOTBALL PUNDITS FOR THE NEXT EXCHANGES.]

NORTHERN MINION
Right then, Graham, the time is nearly nigh for you to complete your part of the bargain with the Dark One. How are you feeling?

GRAHAM
Well, Brian, I reckon it's a good match, I feel like I'm getting paid the right amount and the

boys back in the dressing room will be pleased when I finally pull it off.

NORTHERN MINION (LAUGHS)
Was that a double entendre?

GRAHAM
No, just a metaphor for masturbation.

NORTHERN MINION
Nice one. Give it up!

[THE CROWD GO WILD, LAUGHING AND CHEERING
THERE IS A CRASH IN THE CHURCH ABOVE THEM.]

NORTHERN MINION
Hey, it sounds like the rest of your friends are arriving in the church upstairs.

GRAHAM
They're no friends of mine any more, Brian; not since the deal with your Dark Lord, that is.

NORTHERN MINION
That's the spirit.

[CRASH! THE LADA CRASHES DOWN THE STAIRS AND LANDS IN THE CRYPT, THE ENGINE RUNS FOR A FEW MOMENTS AND THEN SPLUTTERS AND DIES. RUSSIAN MARTIAL MUSIC CREAKS ALONG AND GRINDS TO A HALT.

LET'S SEE WHAT YOU'RE MADE OF, POTTER!

DOORS OPEN.]

TOM
Neat, a church with underground parking.

CINDY

I was steering perfectly well on my own you know.

GARY
Yes, in bloody circles. If I hadn't grabbed the wheel…

CINDY
We wouldn't have driven through the church, destroyed the font or ended up in the crypt!

[YELLS FROM THE CROWD. ORCHESTRAL MUSIC STAB.]

KATE
Sorry, are we interrupting something?

NORTHERN MINION
Seize them!

TOM
Graham! What are you doing up there?

GRAHAM
Looking gorgeous. Yes, that's it, seize them, extra tight.

[CROWD NOISES AND SHOUTS FROM OUT HEROES.]

JONATHON (WHISPERING)
Jeff! – Let go of me! We've got to help them. Jeff, let go! Let go! What about Cindy and the others?

JEFF (WHISPERING)
We can get out while they're being captured.

JONATHON
No!

[THUD AS JEFF THUMPS JONATHON.]

JEFF
That's it, sleep tight, don't let the bed bugs engage you in buying endowment mortgages.

Doesn't rhyme, but it ***is*** sound advice.

[OUT ON THE CROWD OF VILLAGERS CHEERING AND TOM AND THE OTHERS YELLING IN FEAR.]

CUT TO:

18. INT. INTERNAL MONOLOGUE WITH CAR.

CAR
Capitalist acolyte cowl-headed pig-dogs! Be mindful of paint-work, suka-sin! Do you have any idea how many roubles re-spray would cost?

CUT TO:

19. EXT. CHURCH YARD NIGHT.

[JEFF IS DRAGGING JONATHON, WHO IS A BIT AWKWARD, AND HE'S FINDING IT DIFFICULT.

WE HEAR A PUPPY YELP, AND THEN A THUD.

AND THEN AGAIN.]

JONATHON
Stop it! I'm away! I'm awake! Why are you hitting me with a puppy?

JEFF
I couldn't find a glass of water.

JONATHON
Why did you drag me out of there? We've got to save the others!

JEFF (HE STRUGGLES WITH THE NEXT SENTENCE.)
We wouldn't have stood a chance in there. I had to get us out, so that we could regroup and plan.

JONATHON
Jeff, there's blood coming out of your ears.

JEFF
Coherent sentences always do that to me..

JONATHON
So what are we going to do?

JEFF
Well that was the last of the puppies, perhaps there's a cat sanctuary nearby.

CUT TO:

20. INT. CRYPT.

[LOTS OF LOVELY SINISTER MUSIC.]

NORTHERN MINION
Tie them to the sacrifice poles!

[NOISES OF DISCOMFORT FROM OUR HEROES.]

POLISH REPRESENTATIVE: (POLISH ACCENT)
As a fully accredited representative of Positive Polish Images in Media, I would like to complain most vociferously about your use of the words Sacrifice and Poles together in the same sentence.

NORTHERN MINION
Fair enough. Tie them to the sacrifice sticks.

POLISH REPRESENTATIVE:
Thank you.

[FURTHER NOISES OF DISCOMFORT FROM OUR HEROES.]

STICK REPRESENTATIVE (WEEDY AND HIGH PITCHED)
As a fully accredited representative of Positive Stick Images in Media, I would like to complain most vociferously about your use of the words Sacrifice and Stick together….

[DRY TWIG SNAPS AND SPLINTERS CUTTING OFF THE STICK.]

NORTHERN MINION
You can take Political Correctness too far you know, wood-breath.

CINDY
Graham, what's going on?

GRAHAM
Well, I would have thought that was perfectly obvious: you are going to be sacrificed to the Dark One and I am to be ruler of this

[FULL EXORCIST]

miserable planet.

[LAUGH]

CINDY
Well, no, it wasn't obvious, actually; that's why I –

[PISS-TAKE EXORCIST]

Bloody well asked!

TOM
Look, this is all some sort of joke, isn't it?

NORTHERN MINION
No: My mother is law is so fat she's turned into a stereotype, is some sort of joke; in a poncy-Cambridge-post-modern-wanky-student joke sort of way, but a joke nonetheless.

This on the other hand, is all deadly serious. And the emphasis is on the deadly.

KATE
What's going to happen to us?

GRAHAM
A slow, torturous death, with lots of yellings and pleadings. Some unnecessary bloodletting and a certain amount of sexual assault and battery. They put that in just for me.

GARY
But Graham, we're your friends.

GRAHAM
Friends? Gary, you once described me as a pimple on the arsehole of the world, filled with the pus of deviancy.

GARY
But in a friendly way…

TOM
Graham, what happened to you? How did you change so much?

GRAHAM
Well, it all started two nights ago in my bedroom.

NORTHERN MINION
Everybody raise your hands in the air, wave them about and go wibble wibble wibble, ….it's time for the flashback

EVERYBODY
Wibble wibble wibble.

[AD INFINITUM TO FADE]

CUT TO:

21. INT. GRAHAM'S BEDROOM.

[WIBBLE WIBBLE WIBBLE IN AND A BIG SHHHHHHTOOOM!]

GRAHAM

…and pull, and stroke, and pull, and stroke, and pull, and stroke…I do so love it when the rowing club come to visit…and pull, and stroke, and pull and…I bet I'm the best cox you've ever had. And rest. All right boys, go and towel yourself down – would somebody be so kind as to get another barrel of goose grease from the fridge? We're almost out.

[SOUNDS OF FOOTSTEPS TRAIPSING OUT]

GRAHAM

Alone at last.

[MIAOW AND PURRING FROM A CAT.]

GRAHAM

Except for you my lovely kitten.

[MORE MIAOWS.]

GRAHAM

Give the archbishop of Canterbury a furry cat suit and he's yours for life. Don't worry Archbishop, there'll be lots more….special….milk when the rowing club boys get back.

[HAPPY MIAOWING.

SUDDENLY THERE IS A HUGE EXPLOSION, THE ARCHBISHOP MIAOWS IN FEAR AND HISSES.

THEN WE GET ORFF'S CARMINA BURANA PLAYED AS A CHEESY GAMESHOW JINGLE. GO ON, POTTER, YOU KNOW YOU WANT TO…]

NORTHERN MINION

Hello, Graham!

[CANNED APPLAUSE.]

GRAHAM

Who are you? Obviously I appreciate the horns, and the animal hind quarters and the…. shiny... hooves, but what are you doing in my bedroom?

NORTHERN MINION

Isn't he great?

[CANNED APPLAUSE]

Graham, I'm a foul demon from the very pits of Hell!

[CANNED APPLAUSE]

We've been watching you, Graham, for a very long time, and I've just come to let you know that…

[CARMINA BURANA JINGLE]

NORTHERN MINION

…you've just become the most deviant person that creation as ever known! And I wanna tell you, downstairs, that's impressed the *hell* out of us!

[CANNED APPLAUSE]

GRAHAM

I don't understand…

NORTHERN MINION

You're *it*! You've won! You've out-Saded de Sade, you've made Countess Bathory look like a frigid nun and turned the Borgias into a bunch of limp-wristed liberals! You've taken the biscuit and shoved it somewhere that even Craig Charles would find disgusting.

[CANNED APPLAUSE]

You are, tonight…

[DRUM ROLL AND LATIN CHANTING.]

NORTHERN MINION

…going to be offered the chance to rule the World!

GRAHAM

Rule the World?

NORTHERN MINION

And do anything to anyone at…..anytime!

[CANNED APPLAUSE]

GRAHAM

What's the catch?

NORTHERN MINION

You have to sell my boss, the Dark One, the souls of your six closest friends!

[CANNED APPLAUSE]

GRAHAM

Where do I sign?

[WIBBLE WIBBLE WIBBLE.]

CUT TO:

22. INT. CRYPT.

[WIBBLE WIBBLE WIBBLE.]

GARY

You bastard! You saffron-coated, chicken tikka masala, onion bhaji Bastard.

GRAHAM

There's no need to make a meal out of it, Gary.

TOM
You didn't even think about it! There wasn't even a flicker of regret, you sold our souls to the Dark One just to gain dominion over all life and property, to become the supreme being on Earth answerable to no one…

(BEAT)

Bit of a bargain actually, now I come to think of it.

GRAHAM
Exactly! In my position, you would have done the same.

KATE
If I could get into your position, I'd call the Guinness Book of Bloody Records, you deviant scum-sucking piece of pond filth.

GRAHAM
Flattery will get you nowhere.

NORTHERN MINION
The witching hour approaches.

TOM
But it's only four o'clock!

NORTHERN MINION
Bollocks, I'm still on Hell time… Came over on the red eye and black crinkly skin this morning. No matter, the witching hour approaches, and we have only four of the promised six souls!

CINDY
Then you can't sacrifice us! We're saved!

GRAHAM
Could I, then, renegotiate four now; with the other two souls to be phased in later today with an option on my entire extended family including babies and pets?

NORTHERN MINION

Sounds reasonable.

[CANNED APPLAUSE]

Let the sacrificing begin!

TOM
Graham, you total Bastard!

GRAHAM
Hugs.

CUT TO:

22. INT\EXT. FILM TRAILER.

[ROLLING ORCHESTRAL LUSH FILM LIKE MUSIC, YOU MAY WANT TO USE STOCK MUSIC HERE IF YOU'RE A BIT OF A POOF POTTER J

THUNDER ROLLS IN THE BACKGROUND, RAIN BEATS DOWN THROUGHOUT]

VOICEOVER (DEEP AMERICAN ACCENT)
Two friends, thrown together by tragedy, conceive a desperate plan to rescue their friends from the clutches of evil.

JONATHON
I don't think this is going to work, Jeff!

JEFF
It has to – we haven't got any kittens.

VOICEOVER
Pitted against the very forces of Hell, two men stand alone.

JEFF

Mary had a little lamb…we've got to do it together.

JONATHON/JEFF
Mary had a little lamb; its fleece was white as snow…

JONATHON
How do we know he's actually buried here?

VOICEOVER
Gasp at the revelations!

JEFF
I was part of a renegade faction of fans that secretly moved his coffin here to Aldbourne in 1997. It seemed only fitting. Come on! We must continue!

VOICEOVER
Tremble at the implications of this terrifying course of action.

JONATHON AND JEFF
Mary had a little lamb, its fleece was white as snow, and everywhere that Mary went that lambs was sure to GO!!!!!!!!!!!!!

VOICEOVER:
Soil your undergarments as the grave gives up its secrets!

JEFF
It's working! It's only bloody working! Live my beauty! Live!

JONATHON
Oh my God! What have we done?

[STONE GRATING ON STONE, A ZOMBIE GROWL.]

VOICE OVER
See the true horror for yourself only in….

ZOMBIE PERTWEE:
Eeza worza wisa worzel dip.

VOICEOVER
Jon Pertwee has Risen FromThe Grave!

[FINAL ORCHESTRAL SWELL, THUNDER, LIGHTNING ETC.]

VOICEOVER
Rated ninety two and stinky. At soulless windswept multiplexes near you from the 23rd of September.

JONATHON
Please forgive usssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssss!!

[TO FADE]

CUT TO:

23. INT. THE CRYPT.

[MANIC CHANTING IN THE BACKGROUND.]

CINDY
Tom! What are they doing?

TOM
Some sort of ritual.

GARY
I think they're summoning the Dark One.

KATE
Either that or it's a male bonding session gone seriously screwy.

GRAHAM: (LAUGHS)
I can almost taste the power!

NORTHERN MINION
That's my left nipple.

GRAHAM
Sorry.

NORTHERN MINION
No bother, I'll call back later.

GRAHAM
I'll put the frogs on ice, you big horny horned beast, you.

[MINION GROWLS SEDUCTIVELY.]

THE CHANTING REACHES FEVER PITCH.]

NORTHERN MINION
Right, must go, this is my big bit. I shall now summon the Dark One, with the arcane words of the old ones

[CANNED APPLAUSE]

After tumbling came Jill and crown his broke and down fell Jack water, of pail a fetch to hill the up went Jill and Jack!!!!

[HUGE EXPLOSION AS THE DARK ONE APPEARS.

ORCHESTRAL STAB.]

DARK ONE
Greetings tiny ones! Kneel before your Dark Lord!

(BEAT)

Minion!

NORTHERN MINION

Yes, oh Dark Lord of the Ozbourne?

DARK ONE

You can have your Strepsils back. Worked a treat.

NORTHERN MINION

Thank you, oh Lord of the Black Sabbath Reunion Gig.

DARK ONE

Is this the one called Graham?

NORTHERN MINION

Yes, oh foul denizen of the Stock Exchange.

DARK ONE

Come forward, little man.

GRAHAM

No so much of the little. In the trouser department, I'll have you know I have few equals.

DARK ONE

Ever seen one like this?

[THE ZIPPER OF HELL UNDOES.

GASPS AROUND THE ROOM.]

GRAHAM

I prostrate myself before you Oh Dark Lord of the Yard-Arm of the Trouser Scary.

[ZIP FROM HELL IS DONE UP.]

DARK ONE

And are these to be the sacrifices of souls? One…two….three…four…? Four? Why are there only four? – the deal was for The *Six* Souls of your closest friends! Minion! What deception is this?

NORTHERN MINION
We've done a bit of renegotiation. Babies and pets.

DARK ONE
Oh. Nice one. Now, you: What is your name?

TOM
Stay back, stay away!

DARK ONE:
I would taste of your soul, Stayback Stayaway.

[FUZZY BLURRY SOUND OF SOUL TASTING.]

DARK ONE
Hmmm……yuck! Disgusting! It's full of goodness and compassion! I don't want a soul like this! What about this one?

CINDY
Don't touch me!

DARK ONE
Urrrrghhh! It's just the same. Graham!

GRAHAM
Yes, oh Dark Lord of the slightly annoyed eyebrows?

DARK LORD
These are good people! What are you doing offering me the souls of good people? You are the foulest deviant in the history of the universe, how can these…innocents be your closest friends?

GRAHAM
[MUMBLES]

DARK LORD
What? Speak up?

GRAHAM
We're all *Doctor Who* fans!

DARK LORD
Whaaaaaaaaaaaat? Aw, Jeez – I mean: Here I am the Ultimate Eater of Souls and you offer me Doctor Who Fans? Minion, you fool! You didn't tell me he was a Doctor Who fan!

NORTHERN MINION
How was I supposed to know? He has had sex! With other people! How could he be a Doctor Who Fan?

GRAHAM
But you did know, you set up the whole Albourne scam to lure my friends here for the Location Visit!

NORTHERN MINION
Well, when I found out, I had no choice, all the Omens were in the Sky and the orange had many dimples….we had to go through with it!

DARK LORD
Minion, your bottom is going to very very very sore…wait….

[SNIFFS]

…I can smell a soul, a –

[SNIFFS]

soul full of bitterness and hate, one of niggardly compassion and disingenuousness. A –

[SNIFFS]

soul so steeped in petty conflict and wheedling complaints as to be almost shrivelled into a sour husk of life!

KATE
Leave Gary alone you Fiend!

GARY
Oi!

[GARY STARTS SCREAMING. AND THEN STOPS.]

GARY
It's not me! I'm saved I'm saved!

CINDY
You might be saved, but he's eating my bloody car!

[CHEWING AND RENDING METAL SOUNDS OF SOVIET NATIONAL ANTHEM ON VERY DISTANT RADIO.]

CAR (DISTANT BUT AUDIBLE)
Capitalist pig-dog sixty foot high Devil bastard! Piz nach-hui! You wait! I'll have my revenge... I'll have my...

[RUSSIAN MUSIC SWELLS AND CRACKLES INTO SILENCE. THE DARK ONE BURPS.]

DARK ONE
Pardon me. Minion! Bring vodka!

TOM
So are you going to let us go now?

DARK ONE
Yes.

TOM
Really?

DARK ONE
No. Minion!

NORTHERN MINION

Yes oh Dark Lord of the exquisitely cruel double bluff?

DARK ONE
Feed them to the Villagers!

[CANNED APPLAUSE.]

NORTHERN MINION
Always a popular choice, that one.

[A CRASH AS THE DOOR TO THE CRYPT IS BATTERED DOWN.]

TOM
Jonathon! Jeff! Jon?

JONATHON
Wait! Stop! This must end now!

NORTHERN MINION
And you're going to stop us, are you, weedy Doctor Who fan?

JEFF
We're not going to stop you, but we know a man who can.

ZOMBIE PERTWEE
I've got my Venusian Akido head on, Aunt Sally.

DARK ONE
Stop them!

ZOMBIE PERTWEE
And then Hai! They all turned around! Hyah! And they were all wearing Hai! Eyepatches!

DARK ONE
Noooooooo! Not the Anecdotes of Destruction!

[GENERAL SCREAMS OF PANIC FROM THE ASSEMBLED THRONG.]

ZOMBIE PERTWEE
We all cried Hai! When Hyah! Katy left!

[SCREAMS OF PAIN FROM THE DARK ONE AND MINION.]

ZOMBIE PERTWEE
Whodunnit Hai! Was a pile of shit Hyah! But the money was great!

[MORE SCREAMS.]

TOM
Jonathon, Jeff untie us!

ZOMBIE PERTWEE
The best aliens Hai! Were the ones Hyah! With half masks!

CINDY
Let's get out of here! Come on run!!!!

ZOMBIE PERTWEE
Of course! Hai! I loved it Hyah! When they let me ride Hai! The companions!

[FINAL BLOOD CURDLING SCREAM FROM THE DARK ONE AND MINION

FOLLOWED BY A HUGE EXPLOSION AND THE CHURCH COLLAPSING.

FINAL CRESCENDO OF ORCHESTRAL MUSIC.]

CUT TO:

24. EXT. VILLAGE GREEN.

[FIRES IN THE BACKGROUND, BITS OF THE CHURCH COLLAPSING.

OUR HEROES ARE ALL OUT OF BREATH.]

TOM
We made it. We made it!

CINDY
Jeff, Jonathon, that was Pertwee in there wasn't it?

JEFF
Yes. Resurrecting him under the circumstances seemed the only logical choice.

TOM
Rather than calling the authorities?

JEFF
I always miss that one. Next time I promise, police first and then digging up the corpses of dead Doctor Who actors.

KATE
The church. It's been completely destroyed.

GARY
And I hope it's taken that conniving turncoat arsehole Graham with it too.

GRAHAM
Er…. Not…. exactly.

EVERYONE:
Graham! You bastard!

GRAHAM
It's nice to be among friends again.

CINDY

You sold our souls to the Devil!

GRAHAM

Well, yes, but, the bright lights, the temptations, I was seduced…really I couldn't help myself. I was rather hoping that you might show a small modicum of Christian kindness…. and…er….forgive me?

EVERYONE

Like fuck we will! Get him!

[LOTS AND LOTS OF THUMPING AND GRAHAM SCREAMING IN PAIN.

WIBBLE WIBBLE WIBBLE.]

25. INT. GRAHAM'S BEDROOM. NIGHT.

[WIBBLE WIBBLE WIBBLE.

GRAHAM'S YELLS OF PAIN, SEGUE INTO HIM GROANING.]

GRAHAM

Ooooh that's it, you big hunky fellow, you hit me, hit me hard, oohh harder ooooh, Cindy, slap me……slap me……

[WAKES UP]

…what?….oh, bugger, it was all just a delicious dream! What a shame….

[HAPPY MIAOWING. FROM THE ARCHBISHOP.]

GRAHAM

Morning Archbishop, I'll get you some milk in a couple of….shakes.

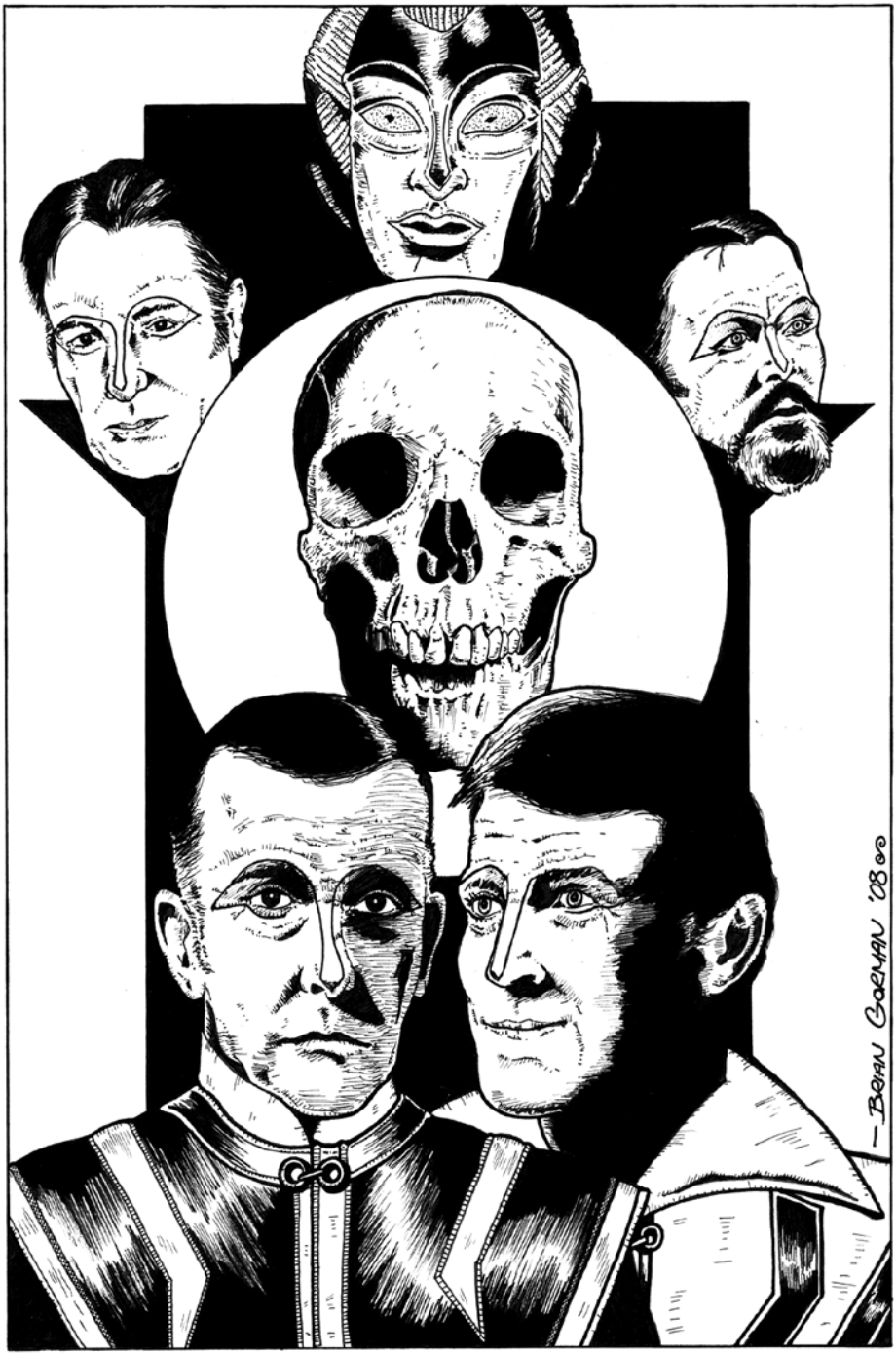
[SUDDENLY THERE IS A HUGE EXPLOSION, THE ARCHBISHOP MIAOWS IN FEAR AND HISSES.

ORFF'S CARMINA BURANA PLAYED AS A CHEESY GAMESHOW JINGLE.]

NORTHERN MINION
Hello, Graham! Remember me?

CUT TO.

END OF EPISODE.


—BRIAN GORMAN '08

Skulduggery

Fiona Moore and Alan Stevens

Why Craig Was All Right

Both of us knew Craig from the Fitzroy Tavern, from meeting each other at conventions and the like, and of course from his books and audios. We were often in conversation due to the fact that we shared many of the same opinions about the classic series, and because he, like us, was involved in the Doctor Who *spinoff world.*

Craig was always a keen supporter of spinoffs in general, and was particularly helpful towards Kaldor City*, always encouraging new people to try the series, and always being interested in the series' development while still respecting our creative decisions. We had always hoped that he would be able to write for Magic Bullet someday, but unfortunately that was never to be.*

Craig enjoyed the police-drama aspects of Kaldor City*, so we're here providing a story which fleshes out some of the background aspects of* Kaldor City: Death's Head*, and how the murder at the heart of that story came about. We hope he would have appreciated this touch of behind-the-scenes detail.*

'Well,' said Landerchild, 'do you have something for me?'

'Presumably,' said Carnell, 'or I wouldn't have asked you to a second meeting.'

'Don't be facetious. Are you going to provide me with a strategy, or are you going to pay me my share of the money from that scheme on which we employed you –' he paused for effect before continuing pointedly '– the one which failed?'

Carnell sighed, leaning back in the tastefully understated black chair behind his desk. 'The reason why the strategy did not work, Firstmaster, was that your group failed to provide me with all the information I needed,' he said mildly. 'There were two major variables of which I was left unaware, and really, I am only entertaining your request for further services out of a combination of generosity... and boredom.'

To himself, Carnell acknowledged that the strategy of which Landerchild was speaking had not been his finest hour, although he also acknowledged in his own defence that it was difficult to have predicted the materialisation of a blue box out of thin air, but he would never have confessed as much to his client.

Landerchild failed to react to Carnell's needling, but simply looked unimpressed. Carnell wondered idly if this were a front or a genuine response.

'I don't hold much with this psychostrategy nonsense,' said Landerchild. 'I had my doubts about employing you on the earlier project, from the beginning. The only reason

why I'm coming to you now,' he said, anticipating Carnell's question, 'is because what I want is the death of Firstmaster Chairholder Uvanov, and I assume that you have a good knowledge of his vulnerabilities, since I know you do work for him at times.'

Carnell spread his hands. 'Client confidentiality, Firstmaster,' he said, 'I couldn't possibly acknowledge any involvement with Uvanov, regardless of whether I have worked for him or not.'

'Yes,' said Landerchild dismissively, 'but as this confidentiality would be extended to any of your clients, I believe myself to be reasonably secure in employing you. Now what have you got for me?'

Carnell took his time replying. 'The advantage which psychostrategy has in these cases over simply hiring, bribing or blackmailing an assassin,' he said, appearing more interested in the position of the objects on his elegant desk than in his client, 'is that it involves seeking out an individual with the motivation to effect the end you wish to achieve, and then pushing them in the desired direction, in such a way that they believe that they have acted of their own free will. Thus, the results of the successful scheme cannot be traced back to you – or to me, for that matter.'

'So you're going to manipulate some fellow into killing him,' Landerchild summarized bluntly.

Carnell seemed amused. 'Well, you must know somebody with a grudge,' he said. 'I was under the impression that it was positively fashionable these days to hate the Company Chairholder.'

This time, Carnell's barbs got through and Landerchild bristled. 'My being here has nothing to do with fashion,' he glowered. 'It's because Uvanov is an unfit steward for the Company. His policies to date have been disastrous, and his handling of recent crises shows a disturbing tendency to favour populism over common sense.'

'He's also not a member of the Founding Families,' Carnell pointed out mildly, 'and god forbid that anyone of lower rank should possibly rise to such an exalted position.'

'That's as may be,' said Landerchild hastily, 'but my concern is that the Company should be led by someone with the intelligence and training to do the job.'

'Well, you may feel that way,' Carnell said, 'but there are a number of other Founding Family members for whom the issue of Uvanov's class is indeed deeply significant.'

'It's too risky to use an aristocrat,' Landerchild dismissed the implication. 'Uvanov's paranoid about the Founding Families; he's suspicious of us as a general principle.'

'But it would be a crime with two obvious motivators – jealousy and class consciousness – which could not be immediately traced back to you,' Carnell pointed out. 'Anyone investigating the crime would simply assume that the man was acting according to his own deeply-held principles.' He waited for any further objections from Landerchild,

then, receiving none, continued: 'So what you need to do is to find someone, ideally a fairly minor Founding Family member, who is down on his luck, and who would be willing to take part in an assassination attempt against the Chairholder in exchange for money and an elevation – or, as might be, a restoration – of his position.'

'It's still too risky,' Landerchild said. 'Those motivations are fairly general, and anyone investigating the matter might still come back to me. Remember, Uvanov's got that new bodyguard, and he's supposedly a lot less derelict in his duties than your average Company Security thug.'

'No, but Kaston Iago's employment would cease immediately upon Uvanov's death. Should Iago decide to remain in the City afterwards, his professional interests are likely to be directed by whoever should then decide to procure his services.'

'What if Uvanov should survive the attempt?' Landerchild demanded.

'You think this strategy will fail?' Carnell asked, raising an eyebrow.

'After what happened last time, I want to be certain there's a contingency plan.'

'All my strategies come with a built-in failsafe,' Carnell said. 'It's simple enough to ensure that Uvanov will not use Iago to investigate, by selecting an assassin with a known connection with Justina.'

The possibility that Kaston Iago was having a relationship with Uvanov's executive assistant had not particularly occurred to Landerchild, though, when he thought back, Firstmaster Strecker had made some sort of remark to the effect that they had seemed rather close to one another at that party during the Firstmaster Murders. However, he did not want to let Carnell know that he hadn't been aware of this. 'Of course,' was all Landerchild said, smiling sourly. 'So, Iago won't investigate. But what if Uvanov employs someone else?'

Carnell emitted a tiny sigh. 'If Iago is out of the way, the task will inevitably fall to Uvanov's other main enforcer: Operations Supervisor Rull. Who will be occupied, for reasons I will go into in a moment, meaning that the investigation will be directed by Deputy Operations Supervisor Cotton. Your contact in Company Security, if I'm not mistaken.' From the look on Landerchild's face, it was evident that he was not. 'Who will therefore ensure that the investigation will come to nothing. As for Uvanov's own suspicions, the assassination will also be such that it could seem to be directed by someone who knows the facts about the Taren Capel incident in which Uvanov was involved when he commanded Storm Mine Four. Should the attempt fail, Uvanov will promptly suspect ex-Firstmaster Chairholder Diss Pitter of being behind it.'

'I also am aware of the genuine facts of the Taren Capel incident,' Landerchild cut in acidly. 'What's to stop him suspecting me?'

'Too obvious a candidate,' Carnell said. 'Uvanov's paranoia does have its uses.

He will immediately suspect the least likely person, and, since Pitter's been taking to his retirement so well... ' he left the rest unsaid.

Landerchild evidently accepted this. 'So the problem then is, how do you get someone close enough to shoot Uvanov, and also to somehow convey to Uvanov that this is the work of a person who knows about the Taren Capel incident while shooting him?'

Carnell allowed a slight hint of disappointment at Landerchild's evident lack of imagination to creep into his voice. 'Shooting is a little direct, I feel,' he said, 'as well as raising the problem of how to get any sort of obvious weapon past Uvanov's security measures.'

'So what are you proposing?'

'A skull.'

Landerchild was about to let Carnell know his opinion of this idea, but then, since the psychostrategist had been making sense all along up to this point, he decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. 'Whose skull?'

Carnell made a dismissive gesture. 'At this point, it doesn't really matter. What matters is that it should be covered in contact poison, placed in a presentation box, and given to Uvanov under the guise of it being Taren Capel's skull, found in the ore hoppers of one of the Storm Mines.'

'Thus providing the connection with the Storm Mine incident,' Landerchild nodded sagely.

Carnell again allowed a hint of disappointment into his voice. 'We don't actually want a direct connection with the Storm Mine incident,' he said. 'If Uvanov feels that there's too close a connection, he might begin to suspect that he is being led. No, if the skull is said to have been found in an ore hopper, that does imply a connection with the Storm Mine incident, but also fits with the myth that Taren Capel walked away into the desert which is being embraced by so many cults these days. Uvanov won't know which direction it's coming from, which should keep him off balance for just long enough for the skull to do its work.'

'So where do we get this convenient skull from then?'

'Well,' Carnell smiled slightly, 'before you get a skull, you first need to get a corpse.'

'So where do we get this convenient corpse?'

Carnell let his smile widen. 'Company Security,' he said, 'Forensics Division.'

'They don't just have bodies lying around there, you know,' said Landerchild.

'Oh, a corpse is easy enough to arrange,' Carnell said. 'What you need is for a rebel arms cache to be found in some out-of-the-way and sparsely populated location. A number of possibilities spring to mind, but the most ideal one would be a particular two-

man research and ore processing station out in Zone Nine, on the edge of the Blind Heart Desert.' Landerchild wondered what was special about this particular station, but decided to restrain his curiosity for the time being. 'All you have to do is arrange for a consignment of, say, ten plasma rifles and assorted explosives to be delivered out there, then ensure that rumours of the existence of this consignment find their way to Supervisor Rull.'

'And how will this consignment be arranged?'

'Through Cotton.' Carnell implied that the answer was obvious. 'He can supply the arms to your would-be assassin, who can arrange to have them placed in the station. And once the volatile Rull learns about the consignment, there should be not one but two corpses available. Meaning that Rull, as I promised, will be too busy to investigate the assassination attempt, since he will be trying to find evidence to support his belief that the two research station operatives were involved with the rebels, and he will also be wanting to prevent the circumstances surrounding their deaths from being investigated too closely by anyone else, as he will want to ensure that he himself is not placed under suspicion of a double murder.'

'And how will I get the skull off one of the corpses?' Landerchild asked.

Carnell's tone did not alter. 'Again, through Cotton.'

Landerchild frowned. 'If anyone decides to investigate the decapitation of the corpse,' he said slowly, 'then the first thing they would do is ask whether there had been any unusual presences in Forensics during that time, meaning that the name of the Deputy Operations Supervisor would promptly come to light.'

'Exactly,' said Carnell, 'which is why he won't be doing the actual acquisition of the skull. He will simply be putting pressure on someone in the Forensics Department who has something to hide, which is known to Company Security. From what I understand, there's quite a few people with antisocial habits in Forensics. Indeed, as the Head of Forensics is one of them, I'd suggest that Cotton start at the top. So to speak.'

'I thought you said psychostrategists were above using blackmail?' Landerchild queried.

Carnell raised an eyebrow. 'I never said that,' he remarked. 'What I said was that psychostrategy involves providing people with a plausible motive for action. In the case of the Head of Forensics, I'd say that blackmail would provide a very plausible motive for cooperating with your contact. Furthermore, it would also provide him with a motive for ensuring that his tracks are covered, so that the disappearance of the head cannot be traced back to him. The plan Cotton will propose is that he will set up a false identity on the Company Security network, the identity of a Forensics technician with full documentation and backdated employment history. The corpse arrives; the Head of Forensics books it in under the name of the false technician; he relieves it of its head, boils the flesh off it and

provides it to Cotton.'

'Wouldn't it be simpler just to have the Head of Forensics book it in, and then have him killed?' Landerchild asked.

'As you said before, if anyone investigates the disappearance of the skull, they will be looking for anything suspicious occurring around Forensics, and another death is, if anything, even more suspicious than the unexplained presence of the Deputy Operations Supervisor. No, in his case I think we can definitely rely on blackmail to keep him quiet.'

'What happens when someone discovers that the identity on the system is false? The trail would immediately lead back to either the Head of Forensics or to Cotton.'

'Not necessarily,' Carnell said. 'There are a lot of people with the means to create a false identity on the system. Leaving aside the large number of individuals with the skills and experience in computer crime in this city who can be employed discreetly for a price, you have the Company personnel officers, Rull, Pitter, Uvanov – in fact, the entire Company Board have the ability to do so, and god knows there are enough disgruntled Founding Family members on the Board to provide suspects. And, if the record is properly backdated, there will be no telling who set up the identity, or when.'

'I've thought of another problem,' Landerchild said. 'What's to stop Uvanov making the assassin take the skull out of the box himself, to prove it's not booby-trapped?'

Carnell smiled. 'Nothing, indeed, that's what he will do. So we simply use a slow-acting poison, and make the assassin think that he has consumed the antidote, to ensure that he complies with the plan. That way, at the end of the strategy, anyone involved who could possibly be linked back to you is either in your pay – ' he ticked the items off on his fingers ' – so closely implicated that they will have to keep quiet out of sheer self-preservation, or dead.'

'Well, you do appear to have covered all eventualities,' said Landerchild, rising and making as if to leave. 'But I'll tell you this, Carnell: it seems like a dangerously overcomplicated scheme to me.'

'If you follow the strategy to the letter,' Carnell said, 'then you should achieve the result you want.'

'It had better work, because if it went wrong, it would be disastrous.'

'Actually,' Carnell remarked as the office door shut firmly behind Landerchild, 'it will only work if it does go wrong.'

Human nature, he reflected, made it impossible for anyone, and particularly someone as arrogant as Landerchild, to follow such a strategy exactly. And even if Landerchild did not succumb to the temptation to modify his instructions somewhat, any strategy which was planned to such an elaborate degree that it allowed no flexibility

whatsoever, was virtually guaranteed to go wrong at some point. Whatever Landerchild did, the outcome would undoubtedly be in Carnell's favour.

∞

'Well,' said Uvanov a few hours later, 'do you have something for me?'

Carnell remarked smoothly, 'Yes, in fact I do.'

'What is it, then?'

Carnell's face betrayed nothing. 'If you suspect that a relationship has developed between Iago and Justina,' he began, 'I would suggest setting up a test which would reveal, firstly, the nature of their connection, and, secondly where their first loyalties lie.'

'And how will I do that?'

'By engineering what will appear to be an attempt on your own life . . .'

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Tread on a Crack: A Tale of the Malleus

Jay Eales

I first became involved in producing unofficial collections of Doctor Who *stories and illustrations on behalf of charities such as the* Foundation for the Study of Infant Death*, (and in the case of* Shelf Life*, the* British Heart Foundation*), featuring a mix of professional and fan creators, which we call 'fanthologies', back in the late 1990s. It was an odd time to be a* Doctor Who *fan, with no series on television for several years, and the false hope of the TV Movie. What we did have was a vibrant culture of fan writers and fan writers-turned-professional. For a time, the Doctor lived primarily on the printed page, through the efforts of Craig Hinton and his peers.*

I met Craig through various online forums, and at the infamous monthly 'Tav' gatherings of Doctor Who *fans in London when I could attend. Craig was always good company, the repository of a bottomless well of anecdotes and scurrilous rumours, some of which were even true! Craig was four years older than I, but we had a lot in common, growing up at the tail end of the 60s and through the 70s.*

I didn't get to know Craig properly until after I published Walking In Eternity *in 2001, and Craig never let me forget it. Most times we met up, Craig would adopt a mock-indignant tone and bemoan: 'Of course,* ***I*** *wasn't asked to be in* WinE*...' He didn't mean anything more than a little ribbing by it, but I still felt a pang of guilt, and that's why, after years of saying I'd never do another one, I allowed myself to be dragged, Michael Corleone style, back into one more fanthology, given that it is in celebration of Craig's life and work.*

Craig was a great supporter of fan writers, and said very generous things about the little corner of the Whoniverse that I carved out for myself in my stories for Perfect Timing 2 *and* Walking In Eternity*, featuring the Malleus Pre-Crime Unit and their Scientific Advisor, Merlin. One of Craig's many projects that never came to fruition was a fanthology of his own, that was to be called* Child of Time*, and he asked me for a Malleus story for it. Of course, this was before the series returned to the small screen, wreathed in glory and the landscape for* Doctor Who *in the written form regenerated once again, and the climate for fanthologies was thrown into question. Was there any need for* Doctor Who *fan fiction when there was a brand new Doctor striding across the screen on Saturday nights? Of course, the fan writing gene is too deeply engrained to stop now, and with a whole new bunch of stories and Doctors to find fresh and interesting ways to integrate into series continuity, the tradition lives on and thrives.*

So, Craig, here at last is that Malleus story I promised you, and I hope that Shelf Life *makes up for my earlier transgression in missing you out of* Walking In Eternity.

'Believe it or not, it is possible for one man to change a world. Perhaps not this man, and probably not this world. One day, all this will be part of a vast empire known as *The Thirteen Worlds*. Welcome to Earth. The others are called Earth, Earth, Earth, Earth... you get the picture. Thirteen linked Earths in a stack, each with its own foibles and quirks, paths not taken. But this is the important one. Of course, they all say that... do I believe all that? When you've been in this line of work for as long as I have, you're very careful what you believe. Put your faith in the wrong thing and you'll get nothing but trouble.'

Detective Inspector Jack Addison, Malleus Pre-Crime Unit Head

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'I don't care who's on the bleedin' phone! I've just pulled a forty hour straight shift, and the only sound I want to hear is that of me sawing logs.' Not exactly courteous at the top of his game, a sleep-deprived Jack Addison was an unexploded bomb that could detonate at any moment.

The Malleus squad had never been over-blessed with manpower or funding, despite their long-standing association with the Catholic church. With the help of an enigmatic figure known by many names, chief among them Merlin, although he also answered to 'Doctor'. For some time, he had worked with the Malleus as their 'Scientific Advisor' – his choice of title, which always made him smile for reasons he never cared to explain.

In recent months Merlin had grown increasingly preoccupied, spending much of his time within his travelling box in consultation with his travelling companions, the three Arthurs; elderly, youthful and boyish members of the same family, Addison surmised, though Merlin never had more than one of them by his side at any moment, so they could not have been close. Whatever plans Merlin had been painstakingly putting in place were plainly about to reach fruition. Addison knew enough of Merlin's methods to stay out of his way. He was one of the very few to whom Addison would defer.

It had been seventeen days since the rune-etched box had departed. Merlin had said no farewells; it was not in his nature. The last person he spoke to was Amanda Hopkins, the Malleus librarian, and keeper of the Gramarye, the secure floor of the station holding all of the arcana that the Malleus had gathered through the ages. Hopkins said he had practically interrogated her for any and all information concerning a woman by the name of Nimue. This was something Addison could relate to. It was always a woman...

No doubt the TARDIS would be back in its habitual resting place in the Malleus wabt, or *pure place*, sooner or later, and until then, they would have to make the best of things. It was just unfortunate timing that everything went to hell in a handcart shortly after

Merlin had departed. Almost as though his absence had triggered a sequence of events, or at least exacerbated them. Addison was startled to realise the extent to which he had become reliant upon his erstwhile Scientific Advisor.

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'I *really* think you should take this call, guv.' Natalie Gordons squirmed behind the front desk, a pained expression on her face; she was caught between the devil and the deep blue. Under normal circumstances, she knew better than to press the issue with her superior officer, but this was anything but normal. Hell, but when was it ever, these days?

'Do you? Good luck with that, then. If it's the Pope himself, tell him to take a number. Play with his rosaries or something... ' Addison had already turned his back on Gordons, his head bowed and his shoulders drooping from sheer exhaustion. He was fit to drop. Opening his mouth to give voice to another epithet, he found himself unable to summon the energy to speak it.

'Bucephalus, guv. He won't speak to anyone but you.'

'*Bucephalus?*' As though he had received a shot of pure adrenalin, Addison spun on his heel, hand already outstretched to receive the phone receiver. Before he spoke, he looked pointedly at Gordons, who suddenly remembered something she urgently needed to do in another part of the station house. When he was sure he was alone, Addison lifted the phone to his ear, 'Speak.'

After he had listened to what the voice on the other end of the phone had to say, he only had a couple more words of his own to add, both of them questions: 'Where?' and 'When?'

A few moments later, he was gone.

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'So, who is this Bucephalus?' Gordons asked the source of all knowledge, including office scuttlebutt, the Malleus librarian Amanda Hopkins.

'Do you want the short answer, or the long one?' Hopkins replied, smiling as she sat among her children, the stacks of accumulated wisdom in the Gramarye; some in scroll form, some bound into books and some in more esoteric coverings. Muffled by sound-dampening cantrips, it was still possible to hear the special collection, even through the thick vault door. The special collection was *screaming*, which always unnerved Gordons whenever she was called upon to pay Hopkins a visit.

'Try the short one,' Gordons ventured.

'Don't know,' Hopkins answered, and gave a great shrug.

'Ah. Do you have a slightly longer answer?'

'I do have a theory,' said Hopkins, with an eagerness that betrayed her desire to discuss it, 'I don't think Bucephalus is a person at all.'

'He didn't sound like an alien on the phone.'

'Not what I meant,' Hopkins said, 'I was thinking more like a code word.'

'You mean like the ERA bomb threats?' Gordons referred to the aeons-old dispute between mankind and Mother Earth's earlier dominant species which had latterly mutated into a new and deadly form with the formation of the Earth Reptile Army; a succession of terror attacks had been preceded by telephoned warnings using a coded signal to identify the real thing from the hoaxers. The Silurians may have been from an earlier cycle of evolution, but they had learned from the mammalian upstarts.

'Exactly. I've no idea what Bucephalus relates to, other than Alexander's horse, but judging by Giantkiller Jack's expression when he hears the word, it can't be good. And Jack clams up completely on the subject. Won't say a word about it. I know you were only assigned to the unit a few months ago, but have you ever known him keep things to himself?'

'Well, there was the heart attack... '

'That was just medical stuff. None of our business anyway. Apart from that, though?'

'I suppose not. Maybe I'll dream about it tonight.'

'I know you haven't got any control over that talent of yours yet, but if you can stop yourself from thinking too much about it, do it. Did you ever hear about Duncan Preston?'

'He was the seer, right? Got pensioned off, or something? Garden leave.'

'Something like that. Now, I liked Duncan, don't get me wrong, but he was a nosey sod. He decided to dig into the mystery calls Addison was getting. He was warned off, twice in fact, but Duncan never could take no for an answer. It's partly what made him such a good detective, I guess. He put his mind to something, and nothing would stop him until he had the answer.'

'What happened?'

'Something stopped him.' Hopkins gave an involuntary shudder. Just then, they realised that the special collection had fallen silent.

'That can't be good,' stated the librarian.

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Addison stepped over the threshold of the public house. Ordinarily, this would have been a pleasurable prelude to the night ahead, or sometimes the day to come, depending on when he was off the clock. This was different. The clock was well and truly running. Also, it was a quarter to three in the morning. The place should not even have been open, extended opening hours or not. Inside, the place was deserted. Almost. Chairs were upturned on tables in the main thoroughfare, ready for the cleaners later on in the day. The main lights were off, although there was a little illumination from the wall fittings behind the bar, and the fire exit signs above the doors. Just enough to give Addison something to stop him from stumbling over the furniture, and for him to spot the pub's only other inhabitant, waiting in the shadows of a booth in the corner.

'Do you want me to bolt the door?' Addison asked, indicating the way he had entered, which remained stubbornly ajar.

'No need,' he replied, 'I've given the place a little tweak so we won't be disturbed. Help yourself to a drink if you like.'

'Anything you'd recommend?'

'Here? Not particularly.'

'I'll skip it, then.' Addison made straight for the booth and slid into the seat, causing the cracked leather to squeak, echoing dully in the empty silence of the venue. His host, from what Addison could make out through the curtain of shadows that he was managing to continue to conceal himself within – despite his vigorous gesticulations – was a bear of a man with little hair, neatly clipped and a small beard. His clothing was nondescript and unmemorable, overshadowed completely by the personality of its wearer. He seemed genuinely pleased to welcome the police officer, but made no attempt to proffer a handshake.

'It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Jack. You're... '

'Why?' Addison's response was not quite hostile, merely impatient, backed up by his body language. Pub booths are uncomfortable at the best of times, and allow little opportunity for a quick escape, should the need arise; and Addison had no idea whether that was going to prove necessary. His senses were raw enough from lack of sleep, and were throwing him all kinds of mixed signals.

'Why?' he repeated, turning the question back on Addison.

'Why now? All the times you've called me before... all the help you've given... you've been dead set against meeting in person. Paranoid, even.' Addison could barely hide his confusion.

'Cautious, Jack. Just keeping my head down.'

'You're very good at it. My best people couldn't find a sniff of you. Like you were never there. Your voice doesn't show up on tape. I bet after we leave this pub, if I get

Tynan to read this booth, she'd draw a blank. Am I right?'

'What can I say, Jack? I'm a very careful man. I'm not going to go into the sordid details, but suffice to say, I need to be. I can't afford to draw too much attention to myself.'

'So, what's changed?'

'You're aware that I have access to information beyond the reach of your own extensive library, yes?' Addison indicated his assent. 'And I have been willing to share this inside information with you in the course of several of your key investigations.' Again, Addison nodded, although he was beginning to wish that he would skip to the end.

'I'm here to impress upon you the severity of what I'm about to tell you. It's gone.'

'So, what we're talking about is a burglary, then?'

'This was what I was afraid of. You're not appreciating the gravity of the situation, Detective Inspector Addison. Part of my collection is *gone*. This is not only intolerable, but *inconceivable*. Praise the Thrones that it wasn't the Black Scrolls or the Book of Vile. Even so, in the wrong hands the missing volume could go viral. Once opened, you'll never get the genie back inside again.'

'A real genie?'

'No, not a Djinn. That was just a figure of speech. This is more like an idea. And on a world where belief is so deliciously dangerous, some knowledge must be contained. It was caught the first time, but it won't be so easy to trap it again.'

Addison made to stand, feeling that the conversation was drawing to a close, 'I have maybe half a dozen officers I could assign to this. And maybe you should look into beefing up your security, if this collection of yours is as dangerous as you say.'

Bucephalus, as Addison had started to think of him, having had no other name offered, stood too, in the same half-squat manner than one must adopt when attempting to leave a booth. His voice raised for the first time, he placed a hand upon Addison's sleeve, 'You're not listening, Jack! It should be impossible to access the collection without my authority. We're talking about the End Times! Better if I just *show you.*

And he did.

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'Is Toddy there, missus?' The boy at the door could not be much more than nine or ten years old, and had that 'just been dragged through a hedge backwards, forwards and then backwards again for good measure' look about him. If a brush had been in the same room as his hair since his last birthday, Mrs Summers would have been astonished.

'I'll go and fetch him,' she said, and had an oddly smug expression on her face, given her otherwise helpful answer. '*Toddy!*' she bellowed down the hall into the house.

'*What?*' came a muffled reply, deeper than you might have expected, given the scenario unfolding.

'*Door*. Get off your lazy arse and see to it,' she practically snarled back at the unseen speaker. There was a long sigh, and the sound of something huge levering itself out of a chair, under duress. Mrs Summers had only opened the door a short way, so as not to let the heat out, and was wedged into the gap, so that the visitor could not see into the house. You never knew whether the little buggers round there were looking to see what you had got, with the intention of nicking whatever they could lay their filthy little hands on later. And this one had that look about him, and *very* filthy hands. She would not have been surprised if he was one of those travellers, or TGBs as she called them: *Thieving Gypsy Bastards*. He looked distinctly pikey to her.

'What do you want?' said the forty-something Toddy Summers, as he wrenched the door wide to get a look at the uninvited and unwanted disturbance of his evening watching *Celebrity House Swap on Ice*, or some other lowest-common-denominator audience pleaser.

'Uh...' came the boy's puzzled reply, 'Is Toddy in?' he finally managed.

'*I'm* Toddy.'

'I mean *Little* Toddy, mistah,' the lad explained as deferentially as he could, given that *Big* Toddy was built like the proverbial brick shithouse.

'His name's *Darren!*' Rodney 'Toddy' Summers spat at the young boy. It was a constant bugbear to him. Given his overreaction every time one of his son's friends called him Toddy, it tended to be a mistake that they only made the once, and if he was being honest about it, he loved the power rush he got from putting the fear of God into impressionable young minds. It possibly made up for him not being the wearer of the trousers in his own house, except when Jill was away.

The boy appeared to be suitably humbled by the verbal barrage, and apologised profusely, and enough to satisfy the giant bully of a man. He decided that he would be magnanimous to the boy, and turned back into the house, causing three of his chins to wrinkle up over his collar, 'Darren! Get your arse down them stairs! One of your little bum-chums is here for you.'

A few seconds went by, before Darren Summers, known to all his friends behind his parents' backs as Toddy, slunk down the stairs and out of the door before his parents could shout again. As he squeezed past his father's portly frame, the older Toddy gave him the same piece of advice he always handed out when his son went out, 'Don't do nothing I wouldn't do!', followed by a loud guffaw.

Darren waited for the inevitable follow-up from his mother, 'There ain't much you wouldn't do, you dirty old sod!' As he tried to hurry out past his mother, he had his head down and shied away as she raised her hand and cuffed him round the back of the head, to reinforce her warning: 'Don't you be late in for tea, or you'll feel the back of my hand.' Toddy saw it as a ritual he had to go through every time his friends came to call on him. It was not until he and his friend were quite a way down the street before his friend, who was called Simon, spotted that he had got a black eye. It was quite a shiner, and he had to have received it some time after school the day before and getting up in the morning. No wonder he spent most of his time either in his room, or out with any friend he could cajole into being available.

'Was that your mum again? You can't let her keep doing that!' Simon said, not for the first time, 'You want to get social services on her.'

'It's my mum. They won't do nothing, 'cos they always give custody to the mum, don't they. Anyway... I don't want to talk about it. What are we doing today?'

'Ah... ' Simon said, 'I've got a special treat for you. Well, two actually, but I'm keeping one as a surprise for later. This is the day we let old "Clothes" Pegg join the gang!'

' "Clothes" Pegg? I thought you didn't like him?'

'I don't. He always stinks of Christmas present talc and farts. But it'll be worth it to see him go through the test, won't it? We can always kick him out later if we want to.'

'I suppose. Are you really going to make him do the Mars Bar test, though?'

'Course I am! *We* all did it, didn't we? That's the only reason I'm letting him be in the gang.' Simon looked very pleased with himself, 'Anyway, here comes Chris with him, so keep your gob shut, or you won't get your present.'

'What present's that?'

'Aah! Wait and see.'

'It's not another Bowie knife, is it? Only my mum found the last one, and I didn't half catch it when she did.'

'Nah. This is *way* better than a knife. Anyway, shut up, or you won't get it at all.'

Toddy shut up. He was used to being told what to do. At least this was one of his friends. He did not mind that quite so much. He saw the third member of the Gang of Three, Chris Ash, coming along the street, talking to Edward Pegg. They almost seemed like friends, but Edward had only moved to their school a few weeks earlier. He had not really settled in yet, and of course, his surname made him an easy target. Simon had given him the nickname "Clothes" Pegg, and thought he was being really clever about it. Edward knew better, having been saddled with it at every school he attended, and as his single mother moved around a lot, mostly to avoid her creditors, that was a lot of schools. He was

surprised when the Gang of Three said that they wanted him to join their gang. Actually, they did not call it the Gang of Three. That was just what their parents called them, as the three of them were usually as thick as thieves. The boys themselves called it The Vulture Gang. The rumours going around the school were that they used to sit up in trees waiting for little old ladies to go under, and then jump down to scare them. Naturally, this wasn't entirely true, but helped to give them a tough reputation, so they did not try to stop it. In fact, Chris Ash had an inhaler, so he was not about to go climbing too many trees. His mother had scared him out of doing anything too energetic, worrying about him over-exerting himself into an asthmatic attack if he did. Mostly, the Vulture Gang's exploits were pretty sedentary, and involved little more controversial than sneaking out of their houses when they had been grounded, and reading the comics that their parents said they were not allowed to see. They did occasionally trespass on the land bordering the playing field, or the Rec as it was known, which had been given over to be an orchard. They would slip in to scrump the apples; and the owner had a number of greengage plum trees that Toddy found particularly tasty. Oh, and then there was *the test*. To be in the gang, you had to pass the test. Few were asked, and fewer still actually went through with it. Just the three of them, as it turned out. In fact, it was just Toddy and Chris who had taken it, because Simon started the gang, and made the rules.

They said hello to the newcomers, and psyched Edward up for the test. He had agreed to do it, because he knew that this was his big chance to become more popular at school. If he got this right, he would have friends. It had been a long time since he had that luxury, and he was determined not to mess this up, even if he was not quite sure what it was that he had to do.

They led him along the local streets, and centred in on the Raj Minimart. A long established general store, it was cleverly positioned on the school route, and so a great number of the schoolchildren would drop in on the way to and from school. There were signs up saying that school bags must be left at the door or outside, and there could be no more than three children together at any one time. The owner, Rajiv Thakrar, had been serving school kids for fourteen *long* years, and was wise to most of their little tricks, hence the heavy signage all over his shop. Regulars knew just how far they could push him before they were banned from the shop for a period, presided over by Judge Rajiv, and decided upon based on the type of infraction, and taking into account the number of previous infractions. Another factor that weighed into the equation, although he would never have admitted it to any of the children, was down to how much they usually spent in the shop. But once you were banned, there was no court of appeal you could go to. A pack of school kids might look pretty much the same, but Rajiv had an excellent memory for such things. And woe betide any child who attempted to shop on behalf of someone who was banned.

The best-case scenario was that they risked facing a ban of their own.

The doorbell jingled as the Vulture Gang piled into the shop en masse.

'Only three of you at a time!' Rajiv called out to them, almost automatically.

'Oh, I'm not with them,' Simon replied, and immediately moved over to the other side of the shop and started to idly flip through magazines. Rajiv let it pass. He was obviously in a particularly good mood this morning. Never mind. They would soon put a stop to that. Chris and Toddy flanked Edward, who was looking very nervous. They tried to distract him a little in order to take his mind off his mission, in case he gave the game away.

'Can I have... a quarter of chocolate raisins... please,' Chris asked, knowing that it would require Rajiv to turn around to the wall of sweet jars behind the counter. Over time, the boys had memorised the order in which the sweet jars were stacked, so they could identify which ones would take the longest to serve. Rainbow Drops were the Holy Grail of sweetshop distractions, but Rajiv had grown wise to that ploy by would-be shoplifters, and would have been tipped off by the request. Chocolate Raisins would do. Popular enough that it would not seem like an odd choice and risk putting the shopkeeper on his guard, but far enough away that Rajiv would need to make use of the mini-step stool to get at it.

Rajiv took a quick glance at what Simon was doing at the other side of the shop. There was a free CD cover mounted on one of the music magazines in today, and he knew that would make it a target for the opportunists who would try to peel the CD case off the magazine, stuck on with that stretchy rubber glue they liked so much. Simon was looking at the computer games console magazines instead, though. No booty there to be spirited away. He turned back to the boys at the counter. The one in the middle looked as though he was going to be sick, and yet he was staring at the chocolate bars as if he had never seen one before.

'A quarter, you say? Chocolate Raisins? You are sure that you will not be changing your mind?'

'Definitely,' Chris confirmed, 'They're my favourites.'

Rajiv bent down to pull the step stool out from under the counter. He carried it to where the appropriate layer of the wall of sweets was, and mounted the steps. Toddy and Chris nudged Edward into action, and he put out a hand gingerly towards the chocolate.

'Are you sure that they are your favourites? I thought that you were a fan of the Rainbow Drops?' Rajiv turned his head back while he was just putting his hands to the Chocolate Raisins jar. Edward's outstretched hand whipped back to his side immediately, though it seemed that, luckily for him, Rajiv had not seen him do it.

'Nah... ' Chris replied, 'went off them, didn't I?'

'Fair enough, young man. That is your prerogative, after all,' and Rajiv turned

back to the job at hand.

Edward snaked a hand out again, and swiped a Mars Bar, palming it almost like a professional, given that it was his first step on the road to larceny. He slipped the confectionery up his elasticated sleeve, where it sat by his wrist, slightly melting from his body warmth. Once Rajiv had finished weighing out the bag of sweets, Chris feigned surprise when the price was rung up on the till, and pretended not to have enough money for them. Apologetically, he said that he would have to leave it. The others took that as the sign to evacuate: Simon from his post at the magazines, flipping through a copy of *Match* while he waited; Toddy with his hands planted firmly in his pockets so that it was clear that he could not have shoplifted anything, and Edward, who was trying not to be crushed by the huge boulder of guilt that was suddenly on his back.

Rajiv knew that something was up, and was more than a little annoyed at the fact that Chris had waited until after he had put it in the till, which meant that his till roll would not balance at the end of the day without some mathematical jiggery-pokery. He would have to fish out the till roll as soon as possible, so that he could mark on it what had happened, and the reason for the refund entry.

While he was thinking about that, the Vulture Gang took that as their cue to make for the door. Simon went first, because Simon always went first. It was a mark of respect, or at least a mark that anyone who forgot the rule would regret it later on.

'Show me your hands before you leave,' Rajiv demanded of them before he would let them go. They dutifully did as he asked, as most of them had nothing to fear. Simon attempted to leave separately, but Rajiv added, 'You too... ' He made a small pretence at outrage, but decided in the end to just hold up his hands, palms up to show his innocence.

The shopkeeper seemed to be satisfied by what he saw, and nodded as he examined each one in turn, Chris, then Edward, and finally Toddy. Edward looked so relieved after he passed his inspection, that he triggered Rajiv's suspicious nature, and he took another look, and spotted a little dribble of chocolate running down his palm from his slightly bulky cuff.

'What's this? Roll up your sleeve, boy!' He made a grab for Edward's wrist, but the boy was as fast as a jackrabbit, and fled from the shop, with the others in hot pursuit. Rajiv vaulted the gap behind the shop counter, and followed them to the door, hurling abuse in their direction. But he did not go beyond the threshold of the shop, as he did not want to leave the till unattended over a chocolate bar. He knew that the little thief would be sorry soon enough in any case, so he was making a show of pursuit as much as anything.

'Is he coming?' Chris yelled as they tore off along the street, crossing the road between a couple of fast moving cars. They went straight for the metal gate by the side of

the Post Office, which cut between that row of shops and the church hall. That alleyway would put them out of sight quicker than any other route that they could have taken, and would bring them out at the other side into the cemetery behind.

'Nah,' Toddy managed to get out between puffs. He was unused to much exercise, as he took after his father a little too closely, 'I think... we're... okay... '

By the time they got to the gateway into the cemetery plot, Simon was already there, waiting. As they reached him, he began to laugh, and clapped Edward on the back, to welcome him into the brotherhood. There was one more thing he had to do in order to seal the bond. He had to eat his ill-gotten gains.

'The sooner, the better,' said Simon, 'Get rid of the evidence!'

'Down in one,' chanted Chris, pumping the air with a fist to egg 'Clothes' Pegg on with his final challenge.

'Does he really have to?' Toddy asked, unsure as to whether there was any need for it now, and remembering his own time in this position. The memories were fresh in his mouth, and he could taste it all over again.

'*Yes*,' Simon stated coldly, 'he *does*,' in a voice that would brook no further argument, 'Cram it all in at once, if you want to be in the gang,' he turned his attention to Edward again, 'You do still *want* to be a Vulture, don't you... *Eddie*?'

Edward had never been called Eddie by any other classmate. He longed to be called Eddie, or anything other than 'Clothes' Pegg, or some other tiresome play on words on his surname. And Simon had surmised that would be the point at which he would turn, and from then on, he would do anything for Simon. It was how he instilled loyalty in his peer group. For a boy of his age, he had an instinctive grasp of psychology, of how to get what he wanted.

After that, nothing was going to stop Eddie from the final test. Awkwardly, he pulled the slightly mashed Mars Bar from his sleeve. His mother was going to kill him for getting chocolate all over the sleeve, but he did not care. With gusto, he tore off the wrapper, and stuffed the warped chocolate log into his mouth, with some effort. It took a couple of pushes to get it in, and he was grateful that he had not picked up one of the extra big ones in the shop. At the time, he had been thinking more about it being easier to hide a smaller bar, rather than his stomach.

As the chocolate touched his tongue, he knew something was wrong immediately. His taste buds reacted violently against the flavour, which most certainly was not the expected one that you normally got from a Mars Bar. Edward choked, in his surprise, and swallowed a little bit of the chocolate and saliva mix, and began to gag. He spat out the part-chewed chocolate bar, and doubled up as if to retch up the contents of his stomach. Toddy had turned away, unable to watch it happen to someone else.

'Uuurgh!' Edward spat out, in between gobs of chocolate tinged spittle, 'It tastes like... *shit!*' He looked at Simon with betrayal in his eyes. Simon stood there, arms folded, enjoying the scene. Simon began to laugh again, a cruel and vindictive chuckle, which was soon taken up by Chris, who having fallen for the gag himself a few months earlier, when he joined the gang, and was relieved to see someone else suffering through it. It made him feel better, and he was quite the sycophantic sidekick to Simon, these days. Toddy refused to join in with the laughing, but put his hand on Edward's shoulder to comfort him a little. Edward shrugged it off, seeing all of them as equally guilty of the trick. Toddy persevered, and dug out a bottle of water he'd got in his jacket pocket in case it came to this.

'Drink some of this. Get the taste out of your mouth.' Edward hesitated, fearing another trick, but then took it without a word. After he had rinsed his mouth around a few times, he was able to ask what had just happened to him.

'It's old Rajiv, innit?' Simon explained, 'He did some deal with the Devil or summat. That's what I heard, anyway. If anyone nicks from his shop, it turns to shit. My brother told me all about it.' He came over to Edward then, and having played the bad cop, switched track and tried being the good cop for a change, 'You all right, anyway? Just a bit of fun, wannit.... you're one of us now. We've all been through it.'

'*You* haven't,' Toddy accused.

'I'm the boss, though, ain't I!' he said without hesitation, before aiming a barb at Toddy for his little act of defiance, which was possibly going to undermine his conditioning of Edward, '*Shit-eater*.' Toddy bowed his head and kept his mouth shut after that.

Simon played his final card, and presented Edward with a Vulture Gang badge and identity card with his name on it. They were shoddy things, very clearly home made, and the badge was put together using one of those badge-making kits, with a picture of a vulture stolen from a comic, but to Edward, this was his badge to the future. He did not stop to think that he should not really be looking for friends who would make him eat chocolate that turned into shit in his mouth. But then, that was why Simon chose Edward, and the other Edwards of the world to be his followers. It was the easiest of pickings for Simon, who was only taking after his elder brothers, who had been doing the same thing for years. And their father before them had been doing the same for a great deal longer.

Having successfully recruited another gang member, Simon saw that he needed to do a little reinforcement on one of his earlier triumphs, and he knew just how to do it. Having given Toddy a little breathing space to cool down, he went to him, and leaned in conspiratorially to him, with a gentle word for his ears only.

'Cheer up, mardy-arse. Time to let you have that present I was telling you about.' Toddy looked up at him, with a slightly suspicious expression, but he was listening. Simon touched the slightly tender bruise of Toddy's blackened eye, and when Toddy winced, he

said: 'We're going to sort this out for you. Once and for all.'

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The newly increased Vulture Gang followed Simon to the school yard, much to their surprise. It was the last place that any of them thought they would be going to on a weekend; apart from Simon, obviously. He had stopped off at his house to pick up a few items on the way, which were in his backpack, though the others did not know what they were, and Simon was keeping it to himself for now. They could tell that there was a big book of some kind, because the shape of it was distorting the backpack quite a bit in order to fit it in.

When they arrived at the school, there were words of dissent and confusion from the others, but Simon silenced them with an upraised finger. They slipped through a weak spot in the wire fencing into the sports field, which was the back way onto school property, and would enable them to get in without going past the caretaker's bungalow, where they risked being seen by the cantankerous old git.

Edward and Chris stopped asking questions when it became apparent that Simon was not going to provide any answers until he was ready. He just said that it was for Toddy. 'We're going to help a mate. That's what being in the Vulture Gang is all about.' Then he would not say another word until they got to the playground.

Once there, Toddy sat down on a low railing to wait, while Simon did whatever it was he wanted to do. Simon was too engrossed to notice, but Toddy saw something new in the playground. It was some sort of shabby blue cabinet daubed all over with runic graffiti. It had an illuminated sign marking it as police property, but Toddy had never seen anything like it. Toddy did not give it another thought. Simon prepared the ground by getting Chris and Edward to chalk a hopscotch grid on the concrete, where the faint remains of earlier versions could still be seen, weathered by the rain and snow, combined with the efforts of generations of caretakers charged with the duty to erase the banned symbol since the last time the children had played here. While they did that, Simon was studying the book he had carried within his bag intently. He had a Post It note marking the page he was interested in. If his brothers knew he had taken the grimoire out of the house they would not be best pleased, but he figured they would be even less happy if he had torn the page out instead. The only reason he was able to get his hands on it at all was because they had only just taken charge of it. Simon did not know how they had managed it, but from their behaviour, they had obviously gone to a lot of trouble in the acquisition. This just made it all the more enticing to the likes of Simon. He had only intended to crack the spine to take a peek, but it was as though it had been waiting for him, or someone like him. And then the deal was sealed, and Simon was out of options.

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Finally, they were ready, and Simon gathered them together for a last minute pep talk, where he would finally spill the beans as to what they were about to do. They were about to perform a Working, in the form of a childish game that they had all decided they had grown out of ages ago; at least, in front of each other they said so. Only Toddy would need to actually work the grid, while the others were there to lend him their energy, and Simon would recite verses from the book to channel those energies.

Outside the school grounds, behind the blackened railings, a man stood watching them. In truth he was mostly watching them, but his attention kept wandering to the blue box in the playground, as though he expected it to do something. Perhaps he thought a policeman would rush out of it and arrest him. At first, Toddy was worried that it was the school caretaker, but his fears were soon allayed when he looked more closely and realised that it could not have been him. The caretaker was a proud man, always dressed smartly, with a tie and neatly trimmed hair and an Errol Flynn style moustache, which he kept immaculately groomed. The man watching them intently from across the playground looked more like a homeless person than anything else. He had unkempt hair and a coat that looked like it would have been turned down by even the most desperate of charity shops. From what Toddy could see from the distance, it looked as if it had not seen the inside of a washing machine for years, if ever. And in that sense, it was the perfect accoutrement for its wearer. Toddy pointed him out to Simon, just to be sure, but he gave him a quick once over, before writing him off as harmless:

'It's just a filthy old tramp. Don't worry about him. He won't bother us, and as far as he knows, we're just playing a kids' game.'

'Could be a perv... ' Chris suggested.

'If he is, I'll just kick 'im in the goolies and we'll have his wallet. Dirty bugger.'

The watcher seemed to be straining to see what they were up to, and talking to himself in some unintelligible mumble. Even if he had been nearer, the boys suspected that they would not have been able to decipher what he was on about. He was probably drunk on White Lightning or something. As long as he did not hit them up for their pocket money. Simon's scuffed Doc Martens were *steelies*, in that they had steel toecaps, so if he did bother them, he would soon regret it. Simon went back to his book, and told the others to take up their places, so they could get on with things. The sooner they started, the sooner they could finish, and Toddy would get his present.

Simon made Edward and Chris stand one either side of the hopscotch grid, and asked Toddy to go and look for a stone, one small enough to fit neatly in his hand, and suitable for throwing. He was to pick the one that called out to him. Toddy was a

little confused by what Simon was asking, but he insisted that he would know which one to choose when he found it. And as bizarrely as it might seem, that was exactly what did happen. Toddy was idly kicking at a pile of fallen leaves on the grass borders of the playground, when he felt something, really *felt* it, like a tingle in the back of his head. He bent down to the pile of leaves, probably raked up and placed there by the caretaker during the week, and scattered them. At the heart of the pile was a smooth egg-like pebble, with marbled veins running through its surface. Toddy closed his fist around it, and he knew this was definitely the one. There could be no doubt. He returned to join the others, and Simon stood before them, like a priest conducting a service.

At Simon's direction, Toddy threw his stone onto the grid, where it landed in the box marked '1'. Toddy lifted up his left leg into hopping stance, and jumped onto the grid, leaping past the box containing his stone, and landing on '3', before planting his left foot on '2'.

Simon chanted: '*One, Two, buckle my shoe.*'

As he spoke the words of power, handed down from generation to generation of children, in defiance of the outlawing of such pastimes by order of the Malleus, the grid began to give off a very faint, but growing energy, only visible to those who were watching very carefully, or those with *the Sight* to see. Unnoticed by any of the boys, the blue box began to emit a low hum, and the rune marks began to pulse in sympathy with the hopscotch grid. Chris and Edward had their instructions, but would only be required to do anything in certain circumstances. They looked over at the place where their silent observer had been standing, but to their relief, he was no longer there. He must have grown bored with watching them and wandered off, possibly back into town, to wait for the off licence to open up.

Toddy lifted his leg again and hopped onto '4', accompanied by Simon calling out '*Three, Four, close the door.*' The energy from the grid grew a little brighter at the next line of the rhyme.

Without hesitation, Toddy jumped onto '5' and '6' simultaneously, planting both feet down solidly on the concrete. Simon continued:

'*Five, Six, pick up sticks.*'

Again, the power output from the grid amped up another degree, and could now be clearly seen by all the boys, but still they carried on. Edward shuffled uncomfortably on the spot at his position, but did nothing else, keeping his arms folded tightly around himself.

'*Seven, Eight, shut the gate,*' Simon went on, as Toddy hopped onto the next box. With the conclusion of the rhyme, '*Nine, Ten, start again*,' Toddy had to rotate on his one foot on the box marked '10' and make his way back down the table, alternating hops and

jumps, all the way back down to the beginning. When he reached '2' and '3', he had to pick up his stone from '1', and begin again. This time, he had to throw at box '2', and retrace the grid from '1' to '10', missing out the box with his stone in it, naturally. As he went, Simon continued to chant the rhyme from his grimoire, and the grid grew with the intensity of its power.

'*Nine, Ten, start again...* ' Toddy reached the grid's end again, and came back down to scoop up his stone from box '2' as he did so. With each pass, he grew faster and faster, and Simon spoke more quickly in order to keep up with him. The grid was practically throbbing with power now, and the two boys flanking the Working had to stop looking directly at it, as they were getting spots before their eyes. They concentrated on Toddy's feet alone. '3', '4', '5' and '6' came and went, and Toddy to all intents and purposes flew up and down the table. Simon was having trouble keeping up with him now, and his tongue was occasionally falling over the words he was forced into speaking so quickly, even thought the words were so familiar from repetition that he did not need to look at the grimoire any further. He did so anyway, because otherwise he would have been drawn to the near-blinding illumination of the leyline-powered grid.

'7', '8' and '9' came and went as if in a blur of activity, almost faster than the human eye could follow. Edward's eyes were hurting so much that he had developed a twitch from trying to blink away the stinging sensation. Chris was hoping that Simon would not notice that he had been keeping his eyes firmly shut against the glare for the last couple of passes, even though that would mean that he would not be able to do as Simon had asked him. His plan was to let Edward go blind if he was stupid enough, and if he saw Toddy stumble from his course, Chris would have time to join in with Edward's chant.

Hopefully, Simon would be none the wiser to it. He thought that the whole exercise was pretty pointless, but knew from long experience that if Simon was serious about doing something, it was no use to argue, or worse still, to laugh about it. There was no doubt that Simon *knew* things. Things that could hurt, humiliate or possibly even kill. Certainly the local cats in his neighbourhood knew to give him a wide berth at all times. Sometimes, Chris wondered if it would not have been better if he had done as the cats did, instead of taking Simon's hand.

On the tenth and final pass of the Working, Toddy hurled his stone the length of the grid, landing the stone smack dab in the centre of the box marked '10' with uncanny accuracy. Until today, he had never been much good at any sporting activity, and certainly not the throwing of stones with any skill at all, but today, he was a boy possessed, both metaphorically, and in some way, physically, it seemed. He was definitely not in complete control of his own actions. Although he was definitely present enough to see it all happen. He just did not feel like he was in the driving seat for it, which was an odd, disassociative

feeling to be experiencing.

'**Stop!**' A voice appeared from out of nowhere, and cut through all the static and fuzziness in Toddy's mind as he raced down the grid table on the final lap home, from '10' down to '1'. He had the stone, warm in his hand, freshly retrieved from box '10' as he turned to return, though he barely recollected anything much past the first couple of laps down the track. The voice was unfamiliar, but oddly commanding. As if his mind had snapped back on like a light at the touch of the power switch, Toddy opened his eyes to see the shambling old man that had been watching them from outside the railings. He was wrestling with Simon for the book, and imploring Toddy not to go through with whatever it was that he was going to do. Toddy looked down to see his leg raised as if to step down onto the ground. It was raised about an inch above the concrete, hovering just above the chalk line between the first box and the second tier of boxes. Was he going to miss the final step, and forfeit the game at the last hurdle? Was he going to do this *deliberately*? A phrase burned in the darker recesses of his mind; it was something he had on the tip of his tongue. In fact, it was on the tip of everyone's tongue, though they did not know it: '*Tread on a crack, break your mother's back*'. In each head, the voice was at once their own voice and that of a voice which comprised of a conglomeration of all their voices, multiplied by the voices of all the others who had ever stood on that spot and spoken those words, all distilled down into a single voice. And the voice sounded *hungry*. It wanted to be spoken aloud, but until Toddy put down his foot, it could not.

'Do not do this thing!' The voice of the tramp called again, distracting Toddy from the siren call within his own head. Now he had said more than '*Stop!*', Toddy could detect some kind of thick accent. Russian, or something? He did not know, but he had watched enough James Bond films to hazard a guess. Near enough, he thought. Toddy looked at the pathetic figure in his shabby clothing, which looked like it was only being held together by the stains. Actually, now that he saw him more clearly, he was not as old as he thought he had been at first. Still *old*, to a nine year old, but not Granddad old. His hand was outstretched to Toddy, while he tried to fight off the attack of Simon, who had obviously been putting his steel toecaps to use.

Rysk, for that was the man's name, was trying to hold the thrashing boy at arm's length, so that he could not do him any further harm to him, but his attention was mostly focused upon Toddy. It made the boy feel quite special. What was he trying to stop him from doing? He could not quite remember any more. It was quite difficult for him to concentrate. His thoughts were like treacle in his mind. All cylinders were not firing as they should, but Toddy was not sure why that should be the case.

'Leave him alone!' Simon howled at the man who was trying to ruin everything, 'Let him finish!' and launched another savage kick at Rysk's leg, who attempted to move it

out of range of the blow, and barely managed to do so in time. Simon managed to snatch the book away, and twisted out of Rysk's grip, running round him to the powered up pattern of the hopscotch grid. The energy was pulsing angrily now, in anticipation of being unleashed, but trapped for the moment, just a heartbeat and a footfall away from release. Simon finally noticed the blue box, from the corner of his eye. He risked a glance. The runes were coruscating with the same primal ley-energy, as though it was siphoning off the power flooding from the grid. The low level humming from the box also stepped up accordingly. Now the box was screaming...

The crackling energy was intense enough to blind, and Simon had to blink away the spots before his eyes. He tried to grab at Toddy, frozen on the spot, whose leg was starting to shake with a combination of muscle spasms from holding it aloft for so long, and the adrenaline rush of emotions coursing through him, but it was as if there was an impenetrable barrier between them. In fact, there was an impenetrable barrier between them, in the form of the ley line energy that Simon himself had summoned up at the beginning of the ritual, without knowing what to expect. There were definite rules of conduct to these sorts of things, and Simon was very much a neophyte when it came to them. His brothers would have understood, but he had not yet been schooled fully in the ways of the occult, which was why they kept the grimoires away from him. They knew of his impatience, and that he was not yet ready to handle the responsibility that it entailed. Not that it prevented him from gaining access to the forbidden books.

When Simon put his mind to something, there was little that could stop him. It was a family trait that his father would have been proud of, and sought to encourage, rather than punish him for. He left it to Simon's brothers to administer any punishment that they felt Simon should require. Just enough to remind him as to whom was in control, but not so much as to dissuade him from his path. That would be such a terrible waste, it was felt.

Rysk had by now caught up with him, and stood across from Simon on the other side of the grid. Simon glared over at him and accused:

'He needs to do this. It's the only way to be free of her. Have you *seen* his eye? She's *always* doing stuff like that.' Although the book was speaking through Simon, at least for the moment it said nothing he would not have chosen to say anyway.

'This is not the way. Bad things will happen. That is why it is *banned* ritual,' Rysk countered, and then turned his attention to Toddy again, 'You know this is wrong thing to do. That is why you hesitate. Must listen to me.'

Simon ran to the other members of the Vulture Gang, and roused them from the stupor they had gone into as the ritual reached its climax. He shook them back into action, and the three of them began to chant in unison, '*Tread on a crack, break your mother's back...*

Tread on a crack, break your mother's back! ***Tread on a crack, break your mother's back!'***

Rysk could see that Toddy's will was faltering, and he was beginning to follow their chant, his lips forming the words along with them, although he had not yet said it aloud. If he could not get through to the boy with a final entreaty, he doubted that he would get another chance.

'This is what you want? You want to break you mother's back?'

Toddy looked into Rysk's eyes, and saw the concern there; concern for a stranger he had never met until today. Then he looked across at Simon's face, Chris' and Edward's, and then back to Simon's. They were all the same. Filled with unholy zeal, demanding of him. Telling him what to do. Threatening if they did not get their own way. Even Edward, who had, until his baptism this morning, been one of the lesser mortals below their notice. It had not taken him long to change, and become another supplicant at the altar of Simon, whose only goal was the furthering of whatever Simon wanted. Toddy recognised that look, because it was the look that his parents wore almost all of the time. Was that what he was doing? Trying to fight back; to teach his mother a lesson for every bruise and broken bone she had given him? To literally '*break her back*?' if that were even possible, and he had seen Simon do enough things that he could not explain, that he was in no doubt that he could carry it off. The confusion was driving him wild. Did he want to harm his mother, to teach her a lesson? If she was cursed by a spell like this, Toddy instinctively knew that there was no enchantment out there that could undo the damage. When blood makes war on its own blood, there is little stronger magic out there. Even the most powerful deflective enchantments would be ineffectual, so it was worthless for Rysk to try to contain the effect. It was down to the boy. He could choose one way or the other, and if his mother had indeed been abusing him the way his friend was accusing her, perhaps he had every right to do this. But it was Rysk's duty to stop it, if he could. He had made his appeal to the boy. It was up to him now.

'Is your choice. Make it a good one,' and Rysk sat down next to the grid, whose energy was coruscating wildly as the power began to build to unimaginable levels, fuelled by the conflict and the growing expectation of Toddy's decision.

Simon was not about to concede. He stood right up to the very edge of the energy barrier, his face lit by the borealis, and actually beginning to scorch from the proximity to such a power transmitter, as he made one last ditch attempt to get Toddy to finish what they had started, 'Toddy! I'm your best friend, aren't I? I only want you to be happy. Won't things be better if she can't touch you again? Toddy? Come on! I did this for you.'

Simon's plea had the desired effect, in that it crystallised Toddy's thoughts once and for all on what he wanted to happen.

'My name's not Toddy. It's *Darren!*' he said, finally, and with that, he hurled the

unnaturally warm stone as far away from him as he could manage. That did not turn out to be very far, as his natural lack of talent had come back to him with the rest of his wits. As it sailed through the energy barrier, there was a little flare up of the ley line energy, and shortly thereafter, the whole barrier went down, just as if a lever had been yanked or the plug had been pulled. The runes on the blue box continued to glow for a few moments longer, as though absorbing the last residual energies like a sponge, before they went dark, looking once again like nothing more than spray-painted graffiti. Simon, snarling his displeasure at Darren's betrayal, attempted to fall upon his former lackey, but Rysk was too quick for him this time, and was able to get between them, even though he had started from a lotus position on the ground, and Simon had been standing right next to Darren when the barrier fell. It was another talent of the Malleus officer, who quickly managed to get the drop on the boy this time round, now that he was no longer distracted by what was going on with Darren.

'Let him go?' Darren asked, 'Please?' He looked at Rysk hopefully.

'You really are lucky, lucky boy. Go away from my sight, before I change mind.' Rysk relaxed his grip on Simon, and pointed him on his way. Simon attempted to retrieve the grimoire, but Rysk was quick to confiscate it before he could touch it. As Rysk bent to pick up the discarded book, he momentarily hesitated, wondering what he might do with the thing. Return it to the Malleus Gramarye, he supposed. But then, if the grimoire had been stolen from somewhere as impregnable as Addison had intimated to him when he sent him to recover it, could they hope to protect it? Should he destroy it? He was put in mind of the book burnings that the Malleus had presided over in years gone by. Dark days, which he did not wish to recall. As his fingertips touched the book, something unexpected happened.

The door of the police box swung ajar, just a crack. Rysk swallowed automatically. He had never been comfortable around Merlin's travelling box, and refused to step inside it. It made him feel ill, with its... *wrongness*. He could not think of another word for it. It belonged elsewhere. Not only was it not of this Earth, but not of this universe. And now it was beckoning him inside. Never! From his spirit bag, the voices were restless. Rowdy, but all of one mind, for once. The path was clear, even though it was not his personal choice.

Rysk took hesitant steps towards the TARDIS, keeping his eyes towards the ground to ward off the evil eye. Gripping the grimoire tightly, in one hand, he reached out with the other to touch the alien box. He turned his head to look over his shoulder, as though his soul depended upon it, and pushed open the TARDIS door. Underarm, he cast the book inside, and scrabbled for the door handle, slamming the door shut again, before whatever was inside could get outside, or worse still, drag him within. Not for the first time, Rysk wondered what had happened to the box's master. Where was Merlin? This was an ill

omen, that he should send his steed in his place.

With his sensitivity to other levels of reality, Rysk felt the pressure building around the box before he heard the engine roar, and stumbled back instinctively. As he fell backwards, the box shifted and pushed through spacetime. By the time Rysk felt his coccyx protest at his rough landing, it was gone.

On a subconscious level, Simon might have recognised that the scrabbling in his mind was abruptly gone, and that any choice he made from now on was all down to him, and him alone. It was just his bad fortune that the choices left to him were extremely limited. His brothers were going to do something really, *really* unpleasant to him once they found out that not only had he taken the grimoire from the house, but that he had lost it. And worse yet, he lost it to a Witch Hammer. His only hope was that he had not just put his family on the Malleus' radar, or he anticipated that his mother would have one less mouth to feed at the table every night from now on...

Despite his gloom, fortune smiled upon Simon anyway, as Rysk was not the sort of Malleus officer who held much store by paperwork. He only believed in people, and his feelings about the sort of person Darren was, and would be likely to become, had been vindicated. When he asked for clemency for his friend, despite the way he had gotten them all in trouble was a great indication that Rysk's gut instinct was spot on. And speaking of guts, Rysk decided that it was time to fill his. He was perpetually hungry, but especially after an event like this Working, he became famished to the point where he could hardly think of anything else.

Partly from hunger, and partly in the hope of a quiet life, he sent Chris and Edward on their way with a flea in their ears. Possibly literally, given the colony of friends who shared his clothing. Rysk reported it in to the Malleus station house as a near miss, before giving Darren a ride home. They did not speak much on the way, but Rysk was getting all kinds of good vibes from the boy now. His spirits told him all sorts of things, and one or two of them had been seers in life, and in death, they could still part the curtain and dip into the future. Darren had learned a great deal about himself today, and while he anticipated that his parents would not have changed, he had. He would never just acquiesce to their unreasonable demands again. And in a funny way, that meant that Simon's well-intentioned act of sorcery had perhaps worked after all, if not in the way he had intended. The thought cheered Darren immensely. He did not think that the two of them would ever be friends again; not like they had been, but with friends like that, who needed enemies?

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Caught in a web of his own making, Merlin slumbered. Having played the role mapped out for him from the moment he gazed upon his newly regenerated features to see flame-red hair. In earlier lives he had seen glimpses of his future self; the stuff of legends. Had there ever been another Merlin, or had it always been his destiny to play that part? He could never be sure, but if there had, he had moved aside to make room. Moved aside, or escaped his fate, leaving the Doctor more effectively trapped than his third incarnation had ever been during his exile. There had been room to manoeuvre, but only between fixed points. The Doctor had always been good at thinking on his feet. There was more than one way to play a tune, and Merlin favoured improvisation. All he could hope to do was to start early enough and prepare the way so that when Morgaine put her own plans into motion, Arthur was ready for her.

When the time came, he walked willingly to embrace the trap that was Nimue, designed to leave the boy-King without his mentor at a critical juncture. One of the *tipping points* Merlin often referred to in his tuition of his young student; he knew better than to try to twist out of it. If he attempted to set history on another path, who could predict how Morgaine would respond in turn. Then, there would be more at stake than merely the Thirteen Worlds; nothing less than the Web of Time itself.

No, the only way to pull a fast one on the Battle Queen of the S'Rax would be to give her what she thought she wanted. In his more reflective moments, he admitted to himself that perhaps it was also what he himself wanted. If the many legends were accurate, he would sleep. He almost looked forward to it. It had been so very long since he slept. He had spun plates, danced and made his plans; he played the great game to the last, and was so very tired. This was the last great mystery of his life, beyond which he could not scry. Would Nimue's trap cause him to regenerate? To die, even?

He was ready to go. Time to hang up his Afghan coat, lay aside the friendship bangles and his name, not for the first time; to say goodbye to all that, or at least adieu.

And he did.

The Watcher

Nick Wallace

Most of my contact with Craig was when Fear Itself *was being written. We were both members of the Jade Pagoda mailing list, and Craig mailed me offlist about something that I can't now remember. We quickly struck up a conversation and before long he was reading the manuscript, offering suggestions, and checking up on references and continuity from other books.*

I'm sure Craig never remembered, but it wasn't the first time he'd offered to help me like that. Back in 1994, I'd been another in the long list of aspiring authors, while Craig was the resident reviewer for DWM. *I didn't know Craig at all, but emailed him and asked if he'd offer some advice on a submission I was working on. Typically, he agreed without hesitation.*

Back then, I never got around to finishing the submission or sending it to Craig. But the offer of help to a complete stranger was one I learnt to be so typical of Craig.

So honest, so fun, so friendly.

So much missed.

The Doctor opened the door and looked out. Darkness waited, the only light that seeping out from the console room behind him. On the plus side, there did appear to be a floor; on the negative, he really couldn't see much more than that.

'Once more unto the breach,' he muttered. Then, grasping his lapels, took a declarative step into the dark, looking accusingly at the blackness, his eyes narrow. 'We are not amused.'

No response.

He turned around, slowly. 'Dragging me into your own time corridor? Honest mistake, could happen to anyone. Keeping me here with a dimensional suppression field? I start to lose my sense of humour.'

Still nothing.

'Well? What have you got to say for yourself?'

There was a click and a circle of lights faded up in the floor around him. Not especially bright, but enough to make out his surroundings. A large glass dome loomed over him, only ending where it intersected a featureless wall.

And outside, beyond the dome, more darkness. Nothing but shadow.

The Doctor looked up at it. He desperately wanted to retain his annoyance, to continue his bluster and frustration. But as he stared into the blackness, it became an

impossibility. His nature would not let him.

'Oh,' he said.

He let his hands drop from the lapels then, his eyes wide on the night.

He didn't turn as a door irised open in the wall behind him, more lights flicking on to mark the approach of another man.

Long, featureless robes covered a bloated body, weighed down by excess and thousands of years. The face was a mass of wizened skin, the eyes all but invisible amidst weather-beaten folds, a few wisps of pure white curling over his bald pate. His pace was slow, steadied only by the mahogany cane in his right hand.

Only when the figure had reached his shoulder did the Doctor acknowledge his presence. 'I take it back. The dimensional suppression field is the least of your achievements.'

'Thank you.' The voice was unrecognisably old.

The Doctor continued to look out through the dome. 'Not one star,' he said. 'Not a single speck of light anywhere.'

'Nothing but the oncoming storm,' the old man said.

Only now did the Doctor glance at him, arching a disapproving eyebrow. 'You might want to watch your metaphors.' He nodded out into the dark. 'That's not a storm. That's just the end. Of everything.'

The specks of the old man's eyes blinked. The folds of skin made it difficult to tell, but the Doctor had a suspicion it meant he'd just rolled his eyes heavenwards.

'I had noticed,' the old man sighed.

'There can't be long to run now,' the Doctor said. 'A hundred years? Maybe even less.' He paused. 'On the universe's clock, this is about as close to midnight as it's possible to get.'

'*Und wenn du lange in einen Abgrund blickst*…' the Doctor whispered. There was a long melancholy moment, then the Doctor clapped his hands together and turned to his companion. 'Enough of that. Don't want to risk anything taking a good, hard look back.' He smiled, 'All very impressive, but if you could just unlock that dimensional suppressor of yours and I'll be on my way.'

The old man started to open his mouth, but the Doctor held up a hand to silence him.

'Let me guess? The last descendants of the Dalek race are threatening your existence? No? Nothing so gauche? You accidentally reactivated the remnants of a lone Cyberman? A power cut let an Ice Warrior escape from your deep freeze? Well, I've got some bad news for you –'

The Doctor thrust his hands in his pockets and leant in close to the old man's

face.

'– I've retired.' He rocked back on his feet, 'So whatever this problem of yours is, you'll just have to deal with it yourself.' He turned and pulled open the TARDIS door, 'Lovely view, but there's a cave with my name on it.'

The old man remained unmoved. The Doctor kept hold of the door handle, staring at him, hoping that he would make some sort of gesture. But nothing came.

He sighed, pushed the door shut once more.

'No Daleks. No Cybermen. No Ice Warriors,' the old man said. 'Not even a Sontaran clone bank.' Leaning heavily on his cane, he turned back towards the door. 'Just me.'

'And who,' the Doctor barked, are you?'

'You may call me the Observer.'

'Observer?' the Doctor spluttered, falling into step behind him.

'Watcher was taken, at least twice over.' the old man replied. 'Copyright problems, you see.'

'It's not the particulars of the epithet that bother me,' the Doctor said. 'It's the use of it at all. What kind of name is "Observer"?'

'Oh, thank you, *Doctor*.'

There was a pause as the door irised open again and the old man stepped through.

'Fair enough,' the Doctor shrugged, and followed him.

The chamber inside was spherical. And massive.

The far side of the room must have been a quarter of a mile distant. The walkway they were on circled the chamber's edge, marking its equator. Other gantries and passages lined the exterior, lifting and dropping away from the balcony on which they stood, each one lined with rows of computer screens – LCD monitors, glass slides, holographic displays. Complex equations flowed constantly across each one.

Quantum interactions, the Doctor thought. And the parameters for space-time visualisation. And dimensional control. Somewhere, on one of those screens, he knew, was the equation which had brought his TARDIS here, that was keeping it locked in this time frame.

He wasn't sure he cared about that now.

The equatorial gantry was broad. Hardwood shelves lined its perimeter, piled high with books. Leather bound, all shaped and sizes. Volume upon volume. Nestled between them were masses of tightly bound scrolls. A handful had been laid out on a nearby table – polished oak – their corners weighed down by other books, stones and an icy chunk of

crystal. They were maps; ranging from star charts, to logging time eddies, to the depths of the oceans.

The Doctor stared suspiciously at the crystal, frowning. 'Isn't that a segment of the –'

'Yes,' the Observer replied. 'Best paperweight I ever had.'

The Doctor nodded, 'This late in the day there's probably not much use for it as anything else.' He turned back to the vacuum that filled the middle of the chamber. A dark void with one tiny light blinking towards its centre.

That's the trouble with the end of the universe,' the Doctor said. 'Not much to see.'

'Entropy increases,' the Observer nodded.

The Doctor looked around, finding a small five-dimensional control panel set into the railing. 'Been a while since I operated one of these.' He flexed his fingers, knuckles cracking. 'Still, I'm sure I can pick it up again.' He laid his hands on the controls and the void juddered.

The Doctor cleared his throat, gave his collar a brief tug, then tried again.

The void shifted, grew larger. As detail gave it shape, they could see tiny clouds drifting through it. Dust and gas. The last matter to make it this far into the future. And slowly the image focussed in on the glowing dot, resolving itself into a perfect three-dimensional image: a sphere, its smooth surface only occasionally broken by lines of metal or blisters of glass.

The Doctor removed his hand from the controls. 'That's us, I take it?' His smile faded as he noticed the one the old man was wearing. 'Yes?' he prompted.

'Is that the best you can do?' the Observer shook his head. 'Still, I can't blame you. It's so long since I used that panel, I'm not sure I could do any better.'

'So long since you used that panel?' the Doctor snorted. 'There's no other way to control an Infinity Chamber of this –'

The Observer waved his hand in the air, and the image zoomed in again, passing through the walls of the sphere, finding the Doctor and the Observer inside, slowly circling around them, before focusing on the Doctor's dropped jaw. On the gantry and in the image his brow creased and he locked his mouth shut again. And then the image retreated, pulling back out until they were nothing but a speck in the dark again.

'All well and good,' the Doctor responded, 'but –'

The Observer shifted his hand again, and the image began to change. Light began to creep in. Tiny dots at the heart of the void, slowly expanding outwards. Vortexes and swirling arms of light, the scale decreasing as the area covered grew larger. Stars and galaxies blossoming. The universe taking shape in the heart of the room.

Until, finally, the Observer waved his hand once more and the image froze.

'There,' he said. 'I think that's pretty much the form you'd recognise it in.'

The Doctor just stared at it, then said, 'That's impossible.'

'Really?' the Observer responded.

'Even for me,' he said, voice rising, 'that would be impossible. You can build an Infinity Chamber in an old glass bottle if you've got the know-how, but the focus would always be small. It's not so much a representation of the real world as a literal manifestation of it. But employed solely using an organic mind, it's like a very clever telescope. One whose focus is limited by the capacity of the user's mind. A world here, a star there. Anything larger and you need exo-dimensional quantum computing to make up the shortfall.'

'Yes?' the Observer prompted.

'You just manifested the entire universe through your own mental focus. And then rewound the entire timescale several billion years. In moments. Which,' he repeated, 'is impossible.'

'Why?'

'Because it would suggest that you have the capacity to focus on billions of years of history across the entire spread of the universe. It would mean that there's not a corner of it with which you aren't, on some level, acquainted.'

The old man simply smiled as the Doctor's bluster faded away, replaced by a curious frown.

'What did you say your name was again?'

'I am the Observer.'

'You must be very old,' the Doctor said quietly.

'I've outgrown my genetic origins,' the Observer replied. 'At some point, hundreds of thousands of years ago, I evolved.'

.Evolution is a useful catch-all term, but it's so often used so inaccurately. When you say "evolved", you mean *mutated*.'

'In your interpretation of the science, you are, obviously, correct. However, mutated has such negative connotations.' He turned away, striding out with his cane. 'Such a keen mind is doubtless wondering why I brought you here?'

'I believe,' the Doctor snorted, 'I have already asked.'

'The question might be seen as implicit in your statements, but at no point have you directly expressed that curiosity.' They had reached a new control set, and the Observer turned back to his companion. 'Something which hints at your current condition. Skirting the issue, playing at its edges, avoiding addressing it head on.'

'Being trapped here?'

'Being trapped by yourself. By possibility.'

The Observer waved his hand; the kind of movement he had used to control the Infinity Chamber. The Doctor was sure that behind his back, that image of the universe was already changing, refocusing. He didn't need to turn to know what it would show. Somehow he could feel it.

Possibility at his shoulder.

A strong face with a sharp eye. Long black robes that swept the floor as he moved. A high black collar framing his head and a dark skull cap only adding to the deathly presence. His future. Looming over him. Waiting.

'Switch it off,' he said quietly.

'You don't know what it is,' the Observer replied. 'Don't you want to look?'

'Switch it off!' he snapped.

The Observer smiled softly, and waved his hand.

The tension across his shoulders eased, and as the Doctor turned, all that faced him was the universe once more.

'Thank you,' he whispered.

'You said there was a cave with your name on it,' the Observer commented. 'This would traditionally be the residence of a hermit, would it not?'

The Doctor straightened, 'I don't see how my choice of domicile is any concern of yours. I don't see what any of this has to do with you.'

'I observe, Doctor. I observe and I never interfere.'

'How very stately of you. Can I go yet?'

'No,' the Observer replied. Something had changed in his tone. A thin line of steel where before there had only been wisdom and humour. 'I didn't bring you here for a quiet chat.'

The Observer reached into the nearby holographic console, his hand manipulating the hard light patterns inside of it. A section of the rail behind them slid back and a tunnel formed, a swirling pattern extending from the balustrade into the heart of the Infinity Chamber, bisecting its representation of the universe. Judging from the movement's of the Observer's fingers, the Doctor guessed he'd just input some kind of polymathic code, unlocking this path.

Which meant he was probably looking at the most secure safe the universe had ever seen.

'Follow me,' the Observer said, and stepped out into the tunnel.

The Doctor paused on the threshold, fingering the badge on his lapel for a moment. Curiosity had killed the cat. What would it do to him?

He sighed and put his best foot forward. The tunnel swallowed him whole. The gantry vanished instantly. The effect was unpleasantly vertiginous.

When it settled he found himself standing in a void. Only not the dark of the universe outside, but a brilliant white, extending forever. The only other thing to be seen was the Observer, leaning heavily on his cane. A sheen of sweat had formed on the old man's forehead.

'You're unwell,' the Doctor said.

'I don't come here often,' the Observer replied. 'If an Infinity Chamber is a manifestation of the universe itself, then to create a space such as this, I have to manipulate the fabric of that universe. It takes –' he smiled. '– a little effort.'

'Why are we here?' the Doctor said patiently. 'Why am I here?'

'Since the beginning of time I have been watching, Doctor. I see, and I observe. But I never interfere. It is a choice I made a long time ago, and it has become more than a creed. It is part of my being.'

'You brought me here. You plucked me out of my native time stream and drew me to this place. That,' the Doctor stated, 'is interference.'

'And because I have watched the universe from the beginning of time, I have also watched you, Doctor. I have seen every action, every choice, every moment as it unfolded. I know you better than you know yourself.'

'Somehow I doubt that,' the Doctor replied.

'Really?' the Observer snorted. 'For the first time in your life, you live in fear of the future. Of what might happen and what you may become. It is a danger we all know in the back of our minds, what uncertainty may bring. But you have been uniquely cursed, in that your fears have been given shape and a name.' He smiled, 'Valeyard.'

'The Valeyard is lost within the Matrix,' the Doctor replied. 'I defeated him.'

'Is that why you refused to look at his image earlier?' the Observer said. 'Is that why you wish to withdraw to a cave? To live out the rest of your days in isolation?'

The Doctor opened his mouth to reply, but found himself struggling for words.

'It is always difficult to combat the truth,' the Observer noted.

The Doctor met the old man's eye. 'If he were ever freed, if that part of myself were unleashed upon the universe…' He shook his head. 'For all his play-acting in that courtroom, all his displays of mock arrogance and wounded pride, he's no pantomime villain. It's why the Master was so keen I know of his existence, to see him eliminated.'

'Because the Master feared him.'

'Unlike the Master, the Valeyard has no casual desire for chaos. When I looked into his face, I knew. He was deadly. The antithesis of everything I believe in, with all my experience to draw on. To direct towards absolute evil.' His back straightened, hands grasping the lapels again. 'I could not and I will not take the risk.'

The Observer stood there, a mirror image of the Doctor, watching him. But

neither man flinched.

And then, something changed.

The air rippled as something forced its way into existence, hanging in the white space between them.

A book. A massive volume of grey pages, bound in thick black leather, its pages held in check by a massive tarnished buckle.

The Doctor knew they were located within a conceptual space, with no real existence, no gravity or oxygen to breathe. There were no natural forces for the book to interact with. And yet the air around it seemed to crackle with unseen energy, a tang of ozone scenting the atmosphere.

If the Doctor had to give the effect a name, he could only have called it power.

The Observer said nothing, just waited.

'You want me to ask you what it is, don't you?' the Doctor sighed.

No reply.

'Well, I'm not playing. It's a book and I've got plenty of those already. And even if I were short of one, I've enough library memberships to keep me in Harold Robbins for a good few years yet. The Braxiatel Collection, the Library of St John the Be –'

He stopped, suddenly aware that he'd been slowly edging away from the black volume.

He looked at the Observer, 'Whatever it is, I'm not afraid of it.'

The old man stayed motionless.

Slowly, cautiously, the Doctor edged a hand towards the book.

He wasn't even close to touching it when he felt its effect. Power, he'd thought, and power was what it was. Playing across his fingertips, an electric shock racing down his arm. Images raced unbidden through his mind:

Alien sunrises. Smiling faces. Towering cyborgs. A warm teapot. A baby crying in the distance. A glass of merlot, black as night. Monsters shaped like myth. A fog swirling around a blue box. Poison raging through his blood.

He snatched his hand away, gasping.

The old man smiled, casually resting a hand on the book as the Doctor sucked his fingertips. 'This book,' he said, 'contains your life, Doctor. Every detail, from absolute beginning to the very final end.' With an oily clink, he released the buckle holding the thick leaves together.

'If you fear the future,' the Observer said, 'you may find solace within these pages.'

The Doctor looked at the book.

'Why?' he asked.

'You know the answer to that.'

'If I were to open those pages, I would have direct knowledge of what was to come.'

'Your every weakness, your every flaw. You would know, you could correct them. Every mistake eliminated. Every fear destroyed.'

The Doctor could feel him then. Not a temporal projection or quantum illusion. But the thing that was waiting inside him, that he had been afraid of ever since the trial. The future. It was his own shadow, massive and looming over him. The weight of it pushing him down.

Too big to fight against, there had only been the one option: retreat.

The book hissed.

'Why?' he repeated. 'Why me? If you are who you say you are, then you've witnessed the whole of existence. And of all those beings, the uncountable individual across all of space and time, you bring *me* here. Why?'

'Because of the good you have done. The good you could still do.' The Observer smiled gently. 'You need time to consider the offer, I think.'

The white void began to shrink about them, the tunnel beginning to open once more.

'No,' the Doctor said sharply. 'No more time. I've made my decision.'

The Observer blinked.

The Doctor stepped forward, positioning himself directly in front of the black volume. He glanced over his shoulder at the Observer and smiled. 'Thank you,' he said.

He reached out with both hands, could feel the air pressing against him as they neared the book. Again the energy crackled. Prepared for it this time he could read it better.

Perpugilliam Brown, laughing as they strolled through the forests of Aataxia. Turlough frowning at a joke. Nyssa and Tegan watching as he delivered a full toss. Adric, drinking in every scrap of knowledge. Romana, opening up to the wonders of the universe beyond Gallifrey's borders.

The pages quivered.

Leela, Harry, Sarah Jane, Jo, the Brigadier… So many others. So much history. The past he already knew, the future waiting to be revealed.

His fingertips found the oily black leather.

The book screamed with anticipation.

And in one swift movement, he slipped the strap back through the buckle, drew it tight, then stepped back.

'Thank you,' the Doctor repeated. 'But my answer is "no".'

The book vanished into the void, then the void itself folded away and they stepped

out, back onto the balustrade.

The Observer reached into the control field and the projection sealed itself up, the safe fully locked once more.

'The dimensional suppression field has also been released,' he said. 'You are free to leave any time you wish.'

'I thought I might stay a little longer,' the Doctor said.

'This isn't a cave,' the Observer said sharply. 'Not of any kind.'

'I thought you might like the company,' the Doctor answered. 'You *are* dying, aren't you?'

'I am immortal,' the Observer snapped. 'Barring accidents.'

'Very amusing,' the Doctor replied. 'And true in the sense of being a complete lie.' He turned, finding a chair tucked beneath a nearby table, and drew it out. 'I think we should talk, don't you?'

The old man's grasp on his cane began to shake, then his balance failed completely, only for the Doctor to catch him as he fell.

'Doctor,' the Observer smiled as he looked up into his rescuers eyes. 'Such an apposite epithet. A healer of the sick. A helper.'

'Yes, yes,' the Doctor said, guiding the old man into the chair. 'There's a lot you can learn from a name. Like *Observer*.' He rolled the word around in his mouth. 'Observer. A name like that suggests you're defined by your role. You watch, you witness.'

'I observe,' the old man coughed, resting his can across his lap.

'You said your control of that Infinity Chamber was the result of evolution? My guess is any physical change would push you towards better fulfilling that role.'

He reached out a hand towards the Observer's head. He didn't get within six inches of the skin before he felt a similar sensation to that which had surrounded the black book.

The Doctor withdrew his hand, blew on his fingertips. 'Information. Power. You're afire with knowledge. I'm guessing a transcendental shunt within your cerebrum, allowing for unlimited data recall.' The Observer said nothing. 'Which would explain your ability to control the Infinity Chamber. But only that.'

He turned to a nearby control console. His grasp pf the system was improving, and within moments the image filling the centre of the room was under his control.

A massive orange sun was distorting the horizon, its reflection filling the sea beneath it. A lone figure stood on a beach of glass, resolute and immovable, his shadow lengthening behind him. A breeze stirred the mass of blonde curls on his head, pulled at the tails of his multi-coloured coat.

'Sunset on Phelixii Major. I was there a few weeks ago.' He looked at the Observer,

'And if I had stood on that beach from that moment until the end of time, I would have seen every moment of its existence. But every moment of its existence *only*. And yet you, you claim to have witnessed everything. Which begs the question: just where did you find the time?'

The Observer looked up at him, smiled a soft paternal smile. 'You forget, Doctor, I have seen every moment of your life. And I am not one of your fellow travellers.'

'I'm not following you.'

'It is never enough for you to have great insight. You need someone to prompt you into revealing it. An audience to show off to. I am not inclined to oblige.'

'All right then,' the Doctor replied. He swung around, tapped one of the computer screens. 'You need to see every moment of the universe's existence, but you only have the one lifetime in which to see it. Either you are a god, a being that has quite literally transcended all limitations of time and space –'

The Observer coughed, his eyes watery as they returned to follow the Doctor.

'– and you're clearly not that,' he continued. 'Or you find yourself more than one lifetime. An infinite number of them.' He studied the screen. 'Quantum equations. That's a Schrödinger engine, isn't it? Enabling you to split your timestream into any number of multiples, trillions upon trillions of them, with each one retaining a connection to the core memory, probably via that transcendental shunt.'

The Observer smiled again. 'And with that, I never had to choose what to observe. Deciding between Adolf Hitler at art school or the lifespan of an Arcturan flutterwing never becomes an issue. Because the existence of the question provides the ability for me to witness both.'

The Doctor could feel something changing behind them. Phelixii Major was receding in the Infinity Chamber, the image rolling back out to encompass the entire universe, pushing on through the millennia, through billions of years. All the stars were beginning to dim, one by one; too small to see each one at this scale, but the effect was clear. The universe began to darken, to shrink in on itself. Light died and millions of world, untold lives died with it.

'The only problem with a Schrödinger engine,' the Doctor whispered, 'is that prolonged use invariably binds the operator's biodata to those equations. And as the universe dies, the possibilities decrease, your life-force drains away.' He looked at the old man, increasingly frail. The massive frame remained, but it increasingly seemed drained of energy, the skin as frail as charred paper. 'There can't be much sustaining you now.'

'I have tricked a few extra moments from the equations, taking energy from some of the parallel timestreams which still remain.'

'Even those must be few in number.'

'True,' the old man nodded. He smiled, 'But you would be surprised at how many of them you and your friends feature in.' He closed his eyes, looking elsewhere. 'In one, the Red Guardian awaits the end. In another, your enemies group at your passing. Yet another and you are exploring an impossible spire at the end of all days.' He opened his eyes again, smiled at the Doctor. 'There is nothing you can do for me, healer.'

'No requests?' the Doctor said. 'No final words of advice? You bring me all this way for me to say "no" and that's it?'

'What would you have me say? Should I plead with you not to withdraw to your cave? To tell you that you still have work to do? That the universe needs its Doctor?' The Observer shook his head. 'They would be wasted words.' He locked onto the Doctor, his eyes suddenly bright, brilliant with power. 'You made that decision the moment you closed that book.'

'A simple lesson,' the Doctor said softly. 'Well taught.'

'The road to hell is paved with good intentions.'

'The Valeyard is a creature of monstrous ego. An evil with its roots in arrogance. To accept your proposition that I was somehow special, that I deserved such foreknowledge or power as that book contained…'

He closed his eyes briefly, could hear the whisper of black robes, the echo of laughter.

'I know where that path leads,' he said. He looked at the old man, the light in his eyes. 'And I know where that cave would lead me.'

The Observer smiled, coughed once, then pushed down on his cane, levering himself upright. 'Come,' he said. 'It is time for you to leave.'

The Doctor closed the TARDIS door behind him, stood poised by the control console. His hand flicked out, casually setting a random collection of co-ordinates, before hovering over the dematerialisation switch. The dimensional suppression field had vanished, he was free to leave any moment he wanted to.

He looked up at the scanner screen. The Observer was there, impassive, leaning on his cane, staring back at the Doctor.

The old man must have known what he was thinking, must have known just how little time he had left. Had known just what he was doing when he plucked the Doctor from his timestream.

The Doctor laid a hand quietly against the console, could feel the hum of his time machine against his skin, comforting. 'That's the other problem with a Schrödinger engine, of course,' he said quietly. 'Those infinite lives become bound to infinite possibility. If you want to break out of jail, there's only one escape route: the moment of initial choice that

led you there.'

For the Observer, it would have been the moment he decided to step back from life. To watch, but not to interfere.

The Doctor wouldn't recall the details of what had happened. He knew that. It was the nature of quantum uncertainty. The Observer existed only in a bubble of possibility, and as soon as he threw that switch, the bubble would burst.

But on some subconscious level, he would remember. It would take time, but he would remember.

'Well taught,' the Doctor smiled.

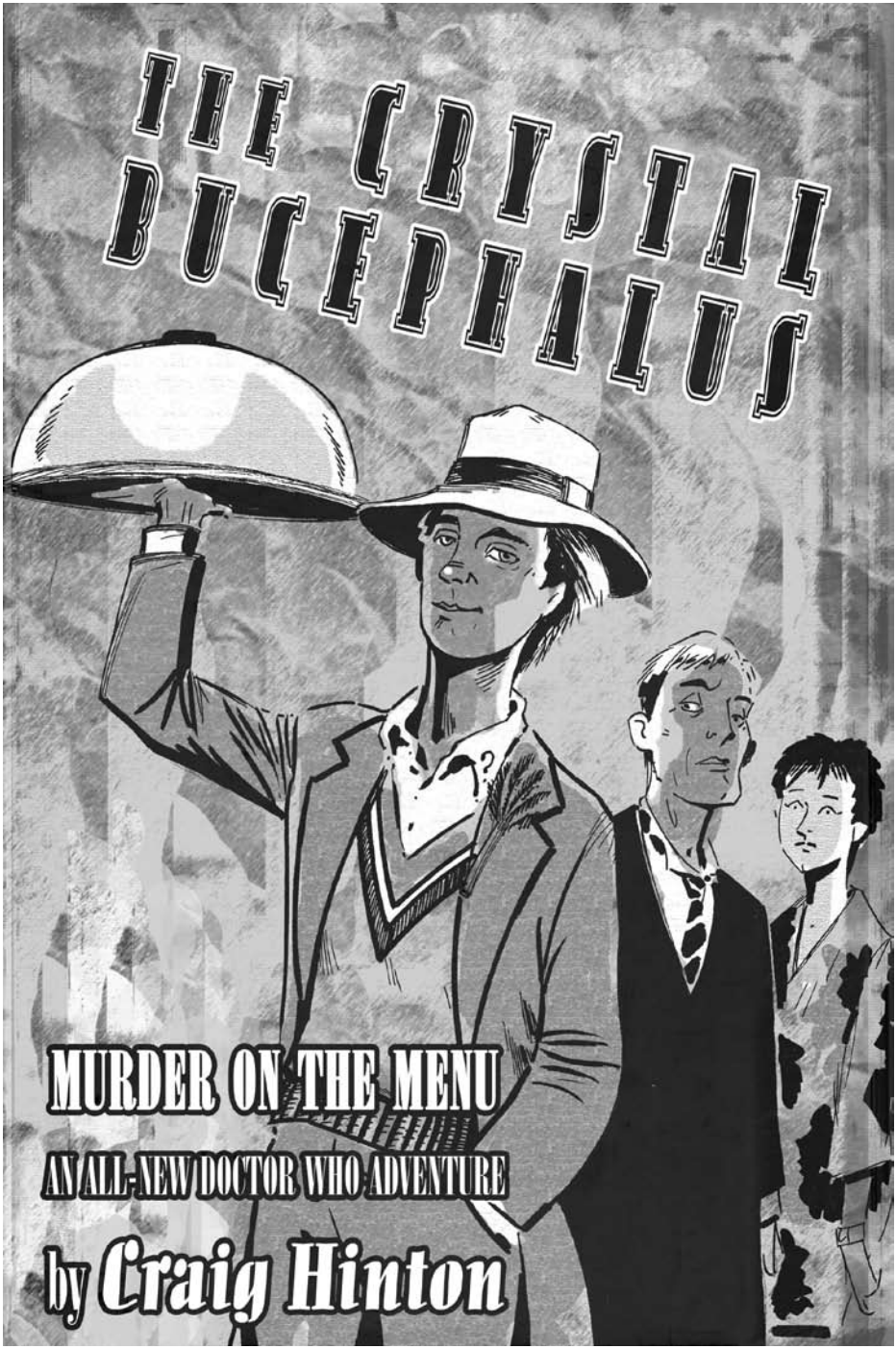
And he hit the switch.

The light began to flash on the roof of the police box.

'Everything passes,' the Observer whispered. 'It's the way of history.'

As the TARDIS faded away, the darkness beyond the dome crept ever nearer.

The Observer closed his eyes and smiled, waiting.


THE CRYSTAL BUCEPHALUS
MURDER ON THE MENU
AN ALL-NEW DOCTOR WHO ADVENTURE
by Craig Hinton

A Fistful of Drabbles

James Ambuehl

James, upon hearing that the great Old Ones would be making an appearance in Synthespians™*, responded thus. For, as it is written in Ye ancient AMBUEHL LORES:*

'Ia! Polymnos! Birthplace of Shub-Niggurath, the Nestene Mother! We, Your Autons, await Your Awakening! Send us Your sacred Control Spheres so that we may live anew! We sing our praises to you, O Sentient planet of plastic, horrid, noxious life! May we strive in vain forever in Your sticky liquid depths! Drown us in Your boiling, black ichor, and devour our souls with Your dark, bubbling essence . . .'

There's more, aye, much more... but I dare not go on! And anyway, it's all covered up with dark splotches...

The Call Of Cthul–Who

The sailors had nowhere to run in the nightmare island-city. Every time they tried to escape through the bizarrely-twisted streets, towards the safety of their ship, the impossible angles would swallow them up and deposit them right back where they had started from. Their plight deemed hopeless, they stood and watched their doom approach on monstrous pounding webbed feet.

The face-tendrils of the titan monster snatched them up greedily, devouring them with a nauseous slurping sound. Soon, only one man stood there, awaiting his horrible fate.

Then all at once a strange buzzing sounded somewhere, and the gargantuan beast threw back its tentacled head and bellowed, in a guttural roar:

'Whatever I've done for you in the past I've more than made up for! Oh, very well then.'

And to the astonished sailor's eyes, the mighty form of Cthulhu entered its titan spire once more, as it faded away with a wheezing, groaning sound.

Doctor Who vs The Emoticons

With a wheezing and groaning sound the TARDIS materializes on a planet which looks quite like a quarry in Surrey.

The Doctor and his young blonde female companion disembark from the blue

police box to have a look-see round.

'Er, Jo, I don't want to alarm you, but, well, at the moment, you see, we, uh, seem to be under scrutinisation.'

(:-} (:-} (:-} (:-}

The girl turns and sees four alien figures, and screams.

>:-(>:-(>:-(>:-(

'No, you silly girl, your screams seem to have upset them! Quickly, now, we must do something to calm them down again before –'

Jo suddenly falls upon her bottom, and her ultra-miniskirt flounces up, revealing her frillies.

(:-) (:-) (:-) (:-)

'Well, that seems to have done the trick. Good thinking, Jo!'

Coming Home

The TARDIS landed on the Doctor's home planet. Exiting, Sam in tow, he walked down a series of corridors and drew up before a polished steel door.

'Doctor,' asked Sam, 'why did you leave home anyway, to fight monsters and right wrongs wherever you found them?'

He extracted a key-card and inserted it, and the doors slid open to reveal an enormous woman within, hair in curlers, threadbare pink night-gown and a lit fag stuck permanently to her lower lip.

'Oh ho! Look who comes wanderin' in as he pleases. Where's my packet of fags? And who's this tart, then?'

The sound of a child squalling could be heard down the hallway.

He turned to Sam and shrugged. 'That's why,' he said with a long sigh.

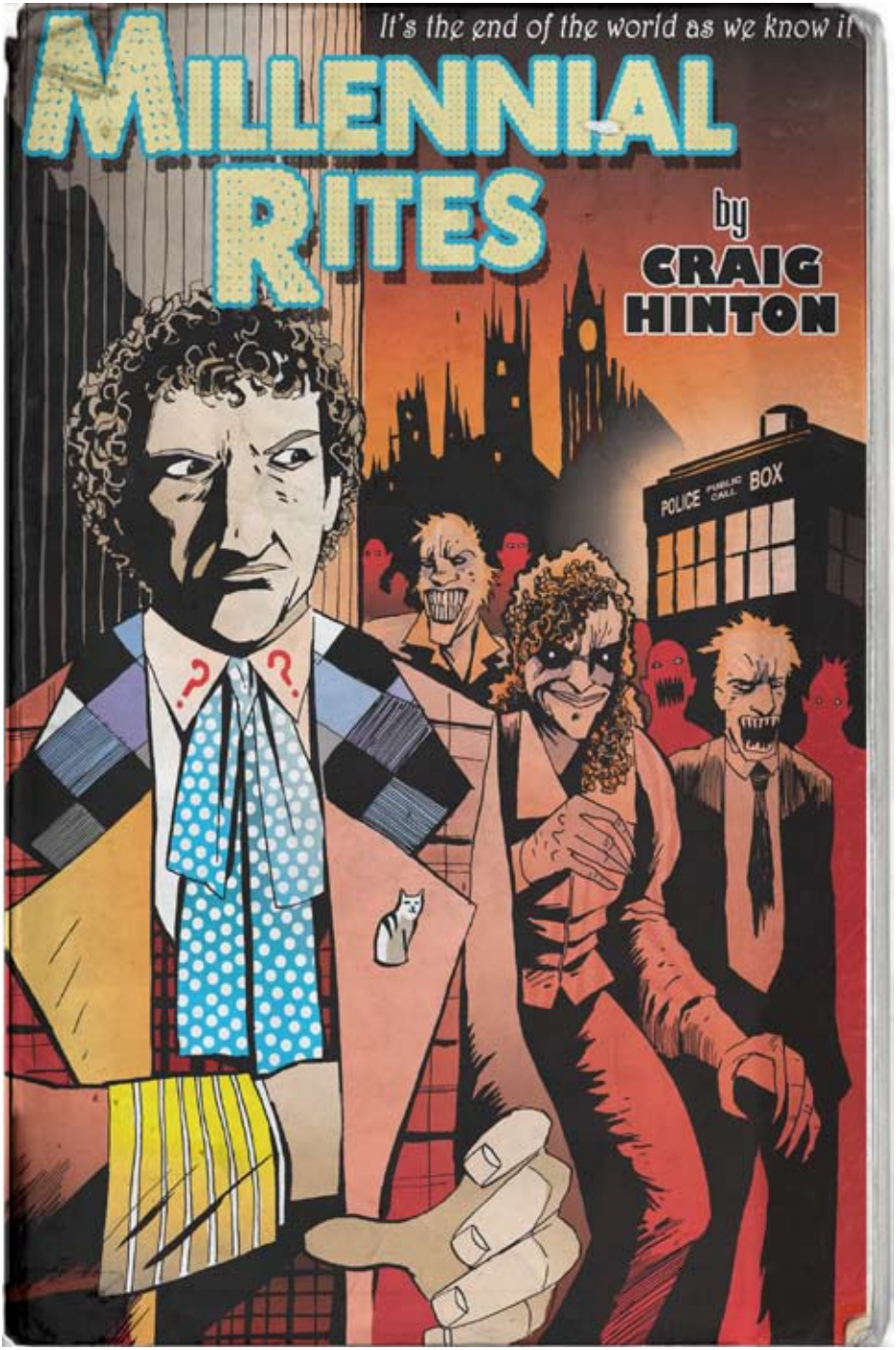
Convergence

The TARDIS materialized in the midst of the cavern located beneath the ruined church in Sunnydale. The door swung open, and a tall, bearded figure dressed all in black stepped out.

On the other side of a mystical forcefield barrier stood another figure, knee-deep in a dark pool, this one also dressed in black but leather-clad and bald.

The two figures leered at each other, supperiority in their bearing and smug smiles. They stared intensely at each other for a moment then both broke out simultaneously:

'It is useless to resist. I am the Master and you will obey me!'


It's the end of the world as we know it
MILLENNIAL RITES
by
CRAIG HINTON
POLICE PUBLIC CALL BOX

Quantum Mnemonics

Adrian Middleton

Quantum mnemonics are a fictional set of tools used to manipulate the fabric of time and space. The principle behind them is that the universe can be reprogrammed if you know the right code, but that the code requires processing of such a high order that only the most advanced races in the universe can (a) write it, and (b) memorise it.

Any being that can perceive a mathematical model of the universe in its head is capable of altering its fabric, but performing such a function is a one-time event. Quantum Mnemonics are shortcuts that turn the full code into a universal 'macro' which can be applied when needed by someone who understands the fundamental principles.

I created quantum mnemonics for an unpublished *Doctor Who* submission, *The Fugue*, and they first appeared in print in the fanzine *Apocrypha* in 1993. Craig was the first person to use them in his second novel, *Millennial Rites*, in 1995.

Quantum mnemonics were originally intended to come in three forms – symbolic, mimetic, and oral.

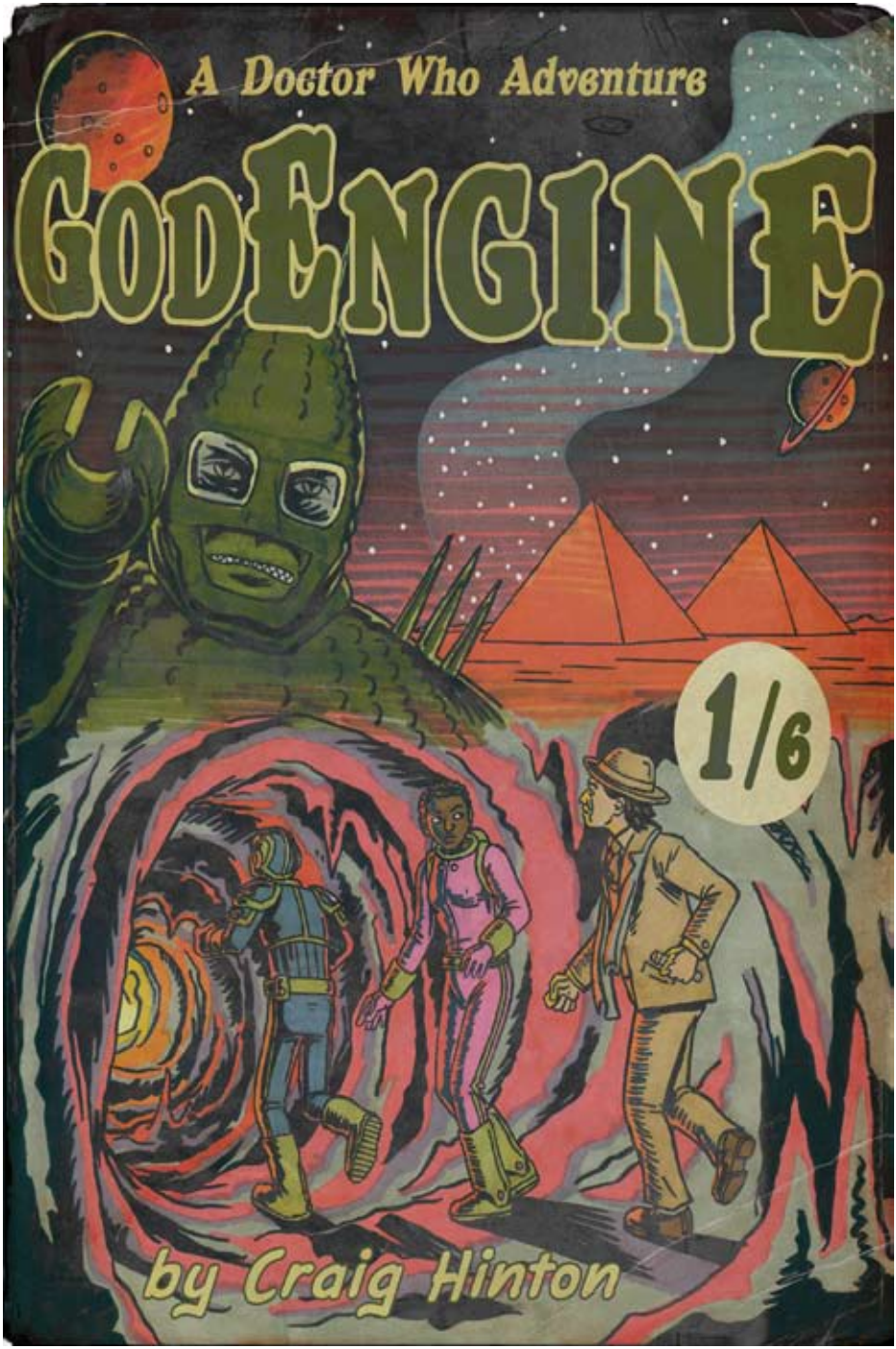
In its original form a symbolic mnemonic was a sign or seal known as a *vever* (taken from the vodun word for a religious sigil). Once inscribed the vever is permanent, and can be activated only by someone whose mind is trained to understand the mathematical nature of the universe. In *Millennial Rites* these *vevers* became the programming language in which the Millennium Codex was written. These quantum mnemonics contained both the laws of the previous universe and the laws of the next universe, and they were written by the Elder Gods. The backstory Craig and I discussed was that Rassilon had stolen the secret of quantum mnemonics in much the same way that Prometheus stole the secret of fire, and that he used them to create the Web of Time.

In the 2006 TV series, *School Reunion* by Toby Whitehouse revisited this concept with the Skasas Paradigm (recalling the programming language Paradigm seen in *Millennial Rites*), which appears to be the way of thinking needed to manipulate the fabric of time and space, thereby unlocking an identical power to that of quantum mnemonics.

Oral and mimetic mnemonics were intended to be embedded ideas that could be committed to memory like real mnemonics. They were harder to create than symbols, and more basic in their scope. Those able to create them tend would use words (hence oral) or hand gestures (cf. mimesis) to focus their thoughts, resulting in a single effect which resembled spellcasting. A future alternate version of the Time Lords, called the Ferutu (an anagram of future) used a similar concept, the power of 'mimesis' in Lance Parkin's novel,

Cold Fusion, published in 1996.

Oral mnemonics were used again, but not named, by the Doctor and the Time Lords of the Fraction in Colin Meek's webcast *Death Comes to Time*. In this story the mnemonics allowed the Fraction to access 'The Power of the Fourth', the greatest and most ancient power of the Time Lords. This story went on to reveal that abuse of this power can damage the fabric of the universe by creating singularities, bringing the concept full circle by tying it in with Omega's use of a power called psychosynthesis in *The Three Doctors*, with which he could use the energies of a singularity to alter the fabric of the universe, where it was referred to as psychosynthesis.


A Doctor Who Adventure
GODENGINE
1/6
by Craig Hinton

The Legend of Rassilon's Cat

Adrian Middleton

And when the Other chose to take his leave,
Lord Rassilon bereft of friends did grieve.
So mighty he, but loneliness the cost.
Without a conscience all, he knew, was lost.

A conscience like the friend he once had known
Until, condemned, his greatest friend had flown.
And fearing that his actions would cause strife,
He jumped into the Loom, and took his life.

'*Oh friend, I shall not see thy like again.*
So I shall try to make thee live again!
I know thou livest on inside thy Loom,
So shall I roll back time to end thy doom.'

'*Thy cells and memories lie in its heart*
I summon thee, return and play thy part.
Inside this womb of metal shall I find
The codes and ciphers to restore thy mind.'

So Rassilon in anger made his plight,
And called on ev'ry Loomsmith and Timewright.
They set about reclaiming his old friend
To bring his mind and body forth to mend.

In fear of their Lord's wrath, they found his sprue,
And built a loom to weave his form anew.
Working day and night to claim their prize:
The day the conscience of their Lord would rise.

But Rassilon his old friend knew too well.
He had prepared against such living hell.
He'd planned some time far hence to be reborn,
When Rassilon was dust would he return.

The proper Loom and at the proper time
Would be required to make the Other climb
From darkness back to Kasterboran light,
To walk in day and shun Aeternal night.

For like the peer who sacrificed his Hand,
The Other was a clever man who planned
Ahead 'gainst all eventualities.
Through blood the viral paradox was his.

To save his future and escape his past
A trap was set to make his repose last.
To guarantee his destiny foretold
By sacred Pythic prophecies of old.

So at a time and place defying fate
The Other's resurrection day was set.
The Loom of Rassilon's House was prepared
And into it his codes and memes were fed.

The Loom was spun and soon it bore the fruit
Of new old life emerging from its flute.
To live again and sit beside his Lord
The conscience of Rassilon did come forth.

Reborn yes, but not quite as intended.
The loomling was not what was expected,
Instead emerged a tail and whisker'd face,
A calculating mind with feline grace.

A shadow of the man who went before,
This was no peer or partner for the Lord,
Who cursed and railed at failure and deceit
Demanding that the process should repeat.

'The Loom has failed. A new one must be made.
A new genetic mixture must be laid.'
As he did whene'er success was flouted
He turn'd on his scientists and shouted.

'Destroy this travesty,' he didst command.
'Bring to me my conscience that I may stand
And face the wrath of the friend that I spurned.'
The cat spoke to Rassilon, and he turned.

'I am the best of what was,' it said.
'You must accept to thee thy friend is dead.
Tired of dark thoughts he was no use to thee.
His sacrifice brought forth the gift of me.'

'I am wisdom free from dark living thought.
I am thy cat, made to sit at thy court.
At thy side shall I speak words without fear.
My words will be true and just for your ear.'

'I am no threat. I am Rassilon's cat.
Thou art my master. Thou wear'st the hat.
None shall abuse me as they did your friend
I am thy conscience from now 'til thy end.'

Rassilon thought long and hard at these words.
They had wisdom and truth, but a cat? Absurd.
He recalled that his old friend was a threat.
But this. A cat. Ridiculous. And yet…

It could be a trap. It spoke with his voice.
It could be a trap. He had little choice
But to spring it and see what happened next.
The Pythia's old curse? Rassilon hex'd.

Lord Rassilon said 'I embrace thee, cat.'
'We must leave Gallifrey hence forth, so that
We may truly bond, far away from here.
For our understanding must be quite clear.'

'I must know thy ways and I must know thee.
And as I truly am, thou must see me
Not as a president of simpering fools
A simple man who lives by simple rules.'

The Barque of Rassilon was summoned
And from the spires of Gallifrey they fled.
They entered the vortex, beyond the veil,
Thus began the Cat and Rassilon's tale.

For centuries they explored time and space
Learning the histories of people and place
Traversing Rassilon's dominion
Together as master and companion.

At journey's end they entered the vortex
One final time, through notations complex.
Where Rassilon set one final challenge
On which his faith in the feline would hinge.

Inside the vortex, by flicking a switch
Rassilon's Barque stalled. He blamed a small glitch.
Becalmed and alone, stranded in the blue,
No means of escape, no hope of rescue.

Rassilon turned to the cat and he said
'I have no plan. Save us, or we're both dead.'
The Cat had foreseen the risks he would take
Putting their very survival at stake.

The Cat gave a smile, 'I could save myself.
I walk by your side and so value your health.
But to threaten our lives for no reason
Has poison'd our friendship. Much like treason.'

'No proper friend would manipulate so.
I walk through time, so perhaps I should go.'
'Thou wouldst abandon me?' Rassilon asked.
'Not now," it replied. "I'll rise to your task.'

It said 'My time to walk alone will come,
But not today, for much is to be done.
I give you my trust to earn your respect
And you must trust to earn mine, so reflect.'

'What can you see in the void? See them move?
The swimmers in darkness that circle and swerve?'
So Rassilon looked and he counted the Zarks
Ancient and graceful like giant time sharks.

'They sense our doom and are waiting to strike
When power fails and we're too weak to fight.'
The Cat shook its head. 'In this situation
Zarks closing in will be our salvation.'

'Their strength and their speed can pull us from harm
To turbulence and away from this calm,
Hitching a ride to the river of time,
All that we need is a hook and a line.'

'With time's wind astern the barque shall set sail
And bear you home where your people will hail
Your return as an omen of great things to come.
At last you will put your trust in someone.'

'Someone? Not thou?' Rassilon was bemused.
The words of the Cat had left him confused.
'And how shall we bind a Zark with a line?
Out in the vortex there's no space, just time.'

'Tie twine to my collar and let me out
I'll jump a Zark and bind it with a knot.
As it turns and flees we'll have salvation.
Thou shalt be free to reach thy destination.'

'But I shall be safe here inside; thee outside
By Zark or vortex surely thou shalt die
I live by risk. I calculate the odds
There we may live, but here we meet thy gods.'

And so the cat stepped out and snared the Zark
Which towed them from the calm and freed the Barque.
To Rassilon's relief his Cat returned,
To pass the test wherein his trust was earned.

When Rassilon was saved his Barque depart'd
To end up home upon the day they start'd.
'No time had passed for them but years for us,'
The Cat was piqued for he expected fuss.

For many years the Cat served his Lord well
As friend and confidante the tales do tell,
And also of his critical naysayings
Of which the Cat is most renowned for saying.

Then came the day when darker thoughts took hold
Dark deeds followed as Rassilon grew bold.
The common people saw that he went mad,
But in his courts no man dared call him bad.

Blood filled the streets of Gallifrey that night.
Defiantly, the Cat left his lord's side
For it could take no more and told him so.
'Thou cannot leave me, I'll not let thee go.'

'*I can,' the Cat replied. 'My time is done.*
The troubled thoughts inside your head have won,
No conscience now could ease your evil deeds.
The time has come, at last, for me to leave.'

'*Thou shalt not leave. Rassilon forbids thee!'*
'*And that, old friend, is why 'tis time to flee.'*
'*Go thou then, but exiled shall you be.'*
'*Never to return? That will set me free.'*

'*Where then shall thou go? What wilt thou do there?'*
It shrugg'd and made to leave without a care
While Rassilon sat down and cried at tear,
'What will I do? Alone I reign in fear.'

With Rassilon prostrate upon the floor
It shrugg'd again and turned towards the door
'*I am the cat who walks through time,' it said.*
'All places are alike to me.' Then fled.

The Quantum Archangel
the thrilling new novel by
CRAIG HINTON

The Quantum Archangel – Notes

Craig Hinton

Craig produced the following notes foe his penultimate Doctor Who *novel,* The Quantum Archangel *– a novel featuring the Sixth Doctor and Mel set between* Trial of a Time Lord *and* Time and the Rani *– for the editors at BBC Books, providing them with anexplanation and background of the cosmology he was using as a backdrop to the story.*

The Guardians

Before this universe, there was another. As the Doctor tells Anne Travers in *Millennial Rites*:

'Before this universe was created, there was another one. A totally different universe, with alien physical laws. The heavens were green, and the stars looked like –' He chuckled. 'Giant doughnuts, to be brutally frank. Very, very different. And, as in this universe, there were people who discovered the deeper mysteries of time and space. In this universe, they're my people, the Time Lords. In that universe, they were also Time Lords, but they were lords of a very strange version of time and space.

'As their universe reached the point of collapse, a group of these "Time Lords" shunted themselves into a parallel dimension which collapsed seconds after ours. Moments later, they erupted into our universe, and soon discovered that they were in possession of undreamt-of powers. And I'm afraid that the power went to their heads – or what passed for heads given their new bodies. They decided that since they now had god-like powers, they should behave like gods.'

When the last universe collapsed, a number of Time Lords made the transition as well. These are now known as the Great Old Ones (qv Lovecraft). They are unbelievably powerful, but some are more powerful than others.

The High Council of the Old Time Lords were all linked to the Matrix when the universe ended. They became the Guardians – sentient life forms that acted as the vessels or conduits through which the fundamental essence of the Universe could act.

* President – Black
* Chancellor – White
* Castellan – Azure
* Matrix Keeper – Crystal

* The Renegade – Red
* The Matrix – Gold.

In this universe, they have become the following:

* The White Guardian – The Guardian of Light in Time, the Guardian of Structure, He Who Walks In Light.
* The Black Guardian – The Guardian of Dark in Time, the Guardian of Chaos, the Guardian of Entropy, He Who Walks in Darkness.
* The Red Guardian – The Guardian of Justice and Morality in Time, the Guardian of Right, He Who Walks in Judgement. Eventually, this will be the Doctor (see Aspects of Evil).
* The Azure Guardians – The Guardians of Balance in Time, the Guardians of Equilibrium, They Who Walk Both Paths.
* The Crystal Guardian – The Guardian of Thought in Time, the Guardian of Dreams, He Who Walks in Dreams. Also known as the Celestial Toymaker…
* The Gold Guardian – The Guardian of Life in Time, the Guardian of Sentience, He Who Walks in Life.

Together, the Guardians are the universe. They can rarely use their own powers individually (it will upset the balance), but together their powers are represented by the Key to Time.

The Transient Beings

The other Time Lords (those not attached to the Matrix but within the bubble that surrounded their Gallifrey) became the "evil from the dawn of time" types, also known as the Transient Beings – Yog-Sothoth, the Time Lord military strategist, became the Great Intelligence; Lloigor, a Senior Watcher, became the Animus; Shub-Niggurath, that universe's equivalent of the head of the CIA, spawned the Nestene Consciousness… and so on.

Importantly, none of them has any memory of the previous universe. All they want to do is conquer. Over time, they have built up a rivalry between themselves.

Fenric and the like… But there are others.

Raag, Nah and Rok (the Gods of Ragnarok)

Raag, Nah and Rok were three of the Guardians of the previous universe, and they helped to bring that crashing to a close in a final great war involving their version of the Key to Time and that universe's equivalent of the Daleks – not too dissimilar to the great war that was facing the Time Lords in our universe (until *The Ancestor Cell*). As the Gods of Ragnarok in our universe, they manipulated other lifeforms, but have very little power: they live in a bubble of their own universal laws. They were ultimately destroyed by the Doctor, who turned their powers against them and dissolved the bubble. Or were they destroyed?

Armageddon (Arma, Gedd and Onn)

Never mentioned. But the other three guardians from the previous universe must have gone somewhere… Worth remembering for a future novel. However, powers and motivation will have to be very different from anything else. And one of them must be their version of The Renegade . . .

Fenric

Fenric is a bit different. When our universe formed, the fundamental forces of the cosmos started flying about. Life scattered and fractured and became the Life of the Universe (not to be confused with the "essence of the Universe" that the Guardians represent). Anti-life did the same, but didn't get there in time (akin to the balance between matter and anti-matter). It was able to create a few lifeforms which followed its creed – the Fendahl, for example – but was incapable of the same widespread seeding. Unable to disperse completely, the remnant gained sentience as the creature Fenric, who would constantly seek to overthrow life. After a chess game with the Doctor, it was banished to the Shadow dimensions. It escaped, but was finally destroyed when its human host was killed. Or was it?

The Eternals, Chronovores and Time Lord Gods

So, that leaves us with three other types of godlike being mentioned in the series and in the books: the Eternals, the Chronovores and the Time Lord Gods.

The Eternals

I propose that the Eternals are actually the second attempt by the Guardians to create life: unfortunately they quite literally lack imagination. The Games and Tournaments (mentioned in *Aspects of Evil* in *Missing Pieces*) are the Guardians' way of 'keeping the kids amused' and (mainly) out of trouble: Enlightenment is the prize (Enlightenment is made of the same material as the Key to Time and the Crystal of Kronos), and provides the winners with imagination. After this second attempt to create new life (impossible, because the Guardians are not part of this cosmos, and can not tap into the Life of the Universe mentioned above), they gave up. The Eternals are now the cosmic equivalent of bored yuppies. Arrogant, spiteful, incredibly powerful but lacking the imagination to use it, they do serve a purpose: they are the Guardians' way of exploring the universe, since they cannot act themselves without upsetting the cosmic balance.

The Chronovores

From *The Time Monster*, we know that the Chronovores are individuals with godlike powers over time. Artemis – the one that the Meddling Monk enslaved for a while in the Alternate Universe Cycle in the NAs – could create alternative realities, while Kronos destroyed Atlantis (except, of course, he wasn't a Chronovore). But what are they? They are obviously linked to the Eternals: it takes an Eternal's blood to enslave one in *No Future* (Vain Beauty). I propose that they are also the Guardians' children – the ones that you keep in the attic, and their first attempt to procreate.

Unfortunately, they created a race of temporal vampires. However, the Chronovores have filled a very necessary niche in the multiverse: they eat the alternative universes and stop the multiverse from running out of reality. Perhaps they were always meant to be created.

The Time Lord Gods

The Time Lords have a number of gods: Pain, Time, Death, Life. I also suggest Hope and Faith (these form the basis for my forthcoming proposal, *Time's Champion*). I propose that they are simply aspects of the 'essence of the Universe', as opposed to Cornell's suggestion that they are Eternals. Whereas the Guardians are the conduits of this essence for the lesser

races, the Time Lords can communicate with the 'essence' directly.

In *Millennial Rites*, the Doctor talks about 'a major shift occurring at the very pinnacle of reality, and its effects would be felt by everyone throughout the cosmos.' I suspect that this is the beginnings of the Faction Paradox/Time Lord/Enemy War, but I could be wrong. But Time and Death require champions. The Doctor is persuaded to become Time's Champion, partly through his fear of becoming the Valeyard, partly due to his genetic programming as 'the Other'. The Valeyard, with the same genetic programming, also wants to become Time's Champion.

In *Millennial Rites*, the suggestion is that the Valeyard will become Death's Avatar. But Matrix screwed that one up…

The Six-Fold Realm

Current scientific thinking indicates that this universe is eleven-dimensional. Three dimensions of space, two of time (including the space-time vortex) and six dimensions which atrophied soon after the Big Bang. These have folded up into something known as Calabai-Yau Space: a six-dimensional region of the universe which no-one can (usually) enter. This is the realm of the Guardians, the Eternals and the Chronovores – it is where they feed.

All of them feed off the Lux Aeterna – the Eternal Light – which is the fundamental energy which underlies the universe. However, they mainly live in the Time Vortex, because this is where they can eat, rather than just gain sustenance. The Eternals feed off imagination. The Chronovores act as 'cosmic gardeners', feeding off alternate timelines (this idea was first proposed in print by Cornell, although it was first suggested during the recording of *The Time Monster* by Ian Collier (Stuart Hyde) in a conversation with Jon Pertwee. (Pertwee basically told him that it was a kid's programme and not to worry about things like that.)

As for the Guardians... well, they simply feed off life itself. Not in a Galactus or Phoenix way, but the very potential of life satisfies them far more than the cold sustenance of the Lux Aeterna.

SYNTHESPIANS™
a DOCTOR WHO book
CRAIG
HINTON
3/6d

House of Pain and Pleasure

Craig Hinton

As well as his more well-known Doctor Who *stories, Craig wrote a gay BDSM trilogy for Virgin Publishing's Idol imprint (*Code of Submission*,* Chains of Deceit*, and* The Final Restraint*). Inspired by his earlier works Craig, somewhat irreverently, produced the following outline – featuring the Sixth Doctor and Peri – for Big Finish's* New Audio Adventures *in July 2004.*

'Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law.'
– Aleister Crowley

Chactice – the world of the Epicures. The finest foods, the most exquisite wines, and entertainment to marvel and astound. The perfect holiday destination for a bon viveur such as the Sixth Doctor. Peri isn't so sure – the Doctor's description sounds far too sedate...

But Chactice has changed. A darker atmosphere now sweeps through the colonnades, tea rooms and banqueting halls. Whereas the world was once dedicated to the more basic pleasures of life, it now seems obsessed with sensualism in extremis. Taffeta and lace have given way to leather and black velvet, while afternoon tea has become something far more risqué. Understandably, the Doctor's curiosity is piqued.

But his investigations are soon hampered on multiple fronts: the hostess, Miss Bathory, seems obsessed with both he and Peri, but for very different reasons, while her depraved consort, Ferenz, has forgotten the meaning of 'self-restraint'. And as the Doctor's famed appetite for life begins to dwindle, Peri discovers new appetites of her own.

As the sedate world of Chactice becomes a cauldron of sybaritic excess, only the Doctor can divine the answer... but does he want to?

Notes

Miss Bathory is a form of vampire, feeding on positive emotions. The more extreme, the more she feeds.

Ferenz is her son – she is actually pregnant with him (but her species breeds in a strange way). She needs a critical mass of positive emotions to fully give birth and for Ferenz to

"become". It is later revealed that she is a renegade from her race and really shouldn't be doing what she's doing.

Peri becomes a complete vamp. 'Give yourself over to absolute pleasure' becomes her watchword.

The Doctor gradually loses all of his taste for the good things in life (a Time Lord defence) – cue desperation on his part as he realises he cannot appreciate beauty any more. When he finally gets it back, the surge is enough for Miss Bathory to give birth.

Ferenz matures into a mature human (I suppose you could compare it with the evolution of Control in *Ghost Light*), while Miss Bathory is reduced to a dirty, raddled old wreck, unable to find pleasure in anything.

The Final Word: Craig Hinton Remembered

Peter Anghelides

How delighted Craig would have been to see Russell T Davies's letter about him in *Doctor Who Magazine*. I can also imagine his reaction: 'Typical! I've got to be dead before they'll print it.'

There are tens of thousands of copies of *Doctor Who Magazine*, and even wider readership and participation in online discussion groups like *Outpost Gallifrey*. Whereas, back in the early days of fanzines, the print run would run well into double figures. We remember so much about *Doctor Who* because we repeat and rehearse it among ourselves – online, at conventions, and in print. So that's what we're doing here, about Craig.

We never studied at the same university, but 20 years ago Craig and I were undergraduate contemporaries in the sense that we met through fandom at that formative time of our lives. We wrote for fanzines like *Frontier Worlds* and *Black & White Guardian*. As attendees at the Blackpool weekends, we were among a crowd of forty fans who crammed into a stuffy B&B TV lounge designed for a maximum occupancy of only two dozen, straining our eyes to work out what was happening in *Ambassadors of Death* behind the

strobing purple effect that bedevilled so many ninth-generation VHS copies in the early eighties.

Subsequently, Craig worked for me as a technical author in an open plan office in Warwick. In one row of desks sat Craig, me, Justin Richards, and my future wife Anne. Our Monday mornings were frequently enlivened by Craig's recounting of his weekend exploits. Because Anne wasn't a *Doctor Who* fan, our daily conversations were both literally and metaphorically over her head, and it's a wonder she subsequently agreed to marry me. On the bright side, though, if she ever wanted to pick up gay men in the Jester pub in Birmingham, she had Craig's tried and tested instructions about exactly where to stand so that the lights near the bar would illuminate her alluringly.

And while he's remembered by the many friends and colleagues he made in software development and IT journalism, it's for his *Doctor Who* work that Craig's most widely known. Not just because his books were popular around the world, but because he was such an enthusiastic online correspondent, via email or forums or discussion groups, with such a wide variety of people.

He and I used to compare notes about what we'd written for *Virgin Publishing* and *BBC Books*. One of the things he was working on, before the TV series returned, was a script for a possible Ice Warriors video. I also remember sending him a not-insubstantial document of comments and suggestions about his draft of The Quantum Archangel. In one paragraph I listed all the continuity items I'd spotted. That single paragraph was longer than the rest of the feedback put together. Craig had a rare passion, even obsession, for continuity. He loved to share it. He'd incorporate it with relish (and a thick layer of relish, at that) in his writing. He called it 'fanwank'. He embraced it.

Not just Doctor Who, either. For example, Craig could prodigiously recall superhero names (and 'true-life' aliases) of comics characters through the ages, which he would demonstrate with worrying accuracy if you asked him. In fact, come to think of it, he'd demonstrate it even if you didn't ask him. And occasionally when you begged him not to. Usually because he was declaiming loudly in a public place. More often than not, a Public House. His enthusiasm would overwhelm him, his drinking partners, and anyone within the immediate vicinity. He once silenced a friend's continuity quibble (and conversations at every other table in the pub) with the triumphantly emphatic declaration:

'Well, I'd like to hear what the Time Lords think about that!!'

But Craig was rarely embarrassed. Indeed, the rare occasions on which he was embarrassed just became further anecdotes for regaling friends with at the pub, accompanied by an appropriate cult TV reference. He would cheerfully throw out both arms and declaim 'Maximum power!' like Jacqueline Pearce as Servalan at the end of the Blake's 7 episode *Terminal*. The trick, I found, was to ensure you sat opposite him and not beside him, because that improved your odds on rescuing your pint.

When Craig died in December 2006, there was a spontaneous online meeting at the *Outpost Gallifrey* forum. The thread's still available for existing members here: http://gallifreyone.com/forum/showthread.php?t=107631

At the subsequent GallifreyOne convention in Los Angeles, February 2007, the organisers ran a main panel in Craig's memory, called 'A Tribute to the Fanwank God'. In a previous year, Craig had been presented by Andrew Orton with a t-shirt that declared this honorary title. For the 2007 convention, Sue Cowley created t-shirts and badges with which we could declare ourselves 'Fanwank Acolytes'. Still available here: http://www.cafepress.com/reefstation1a, http://www.cafepress.com/reefstation1b

The panelists included me, Paul Cornell, and Jason Haigh-Ellery. The convention auction raised several thousand dollars for the American Heart Association, in Craig's memory.

In the UK, friends and colleagues made contributions to the British Heart Foundation. People have to be careful how they type that web address: http://www.bhf.org.uk It would have delighted naughty Craig to know that one must not miss the '.uk' off the end of it, because then instead of displaying a charitable site about 'beating heart disease together' it reveals a porn site, where it's not heart disease that visitors are beating off.

That *GallifreyOne* panel gave me two opportunities. One was to repeatedly say 'wank' into a microphone before a large crowd (my parents would be so proud of me). More importantly, it was a chance for each of us to capture some of Craig's irreverence and dark humour. So, obviously, I talked about his funeral. And I thought I'd tell you about that, too.

A very large number of people turned up on a bright day in December 2006 at a Portsmouth crematorium on the South Coast of England. It was an unusual collision of folk from various parts of Craig's life. A few of us knew him from several different places in his life: university, *Doctor Who*, his work at IBM, knowing his family. But for most, this was the first time they'd met his computing colleagues, his science fiction friends, his relations, his journalist counterparts, his fellow teachers, and several former boyfriends.

We clustered together in the waiting area while the hearse arrived. It was, we decided, quite the worst *Doctor Who* convention we'd ever been to. All the men seemed to have dressed in the same costume (the Master from *Planet of Fire*, when Craig would obviously have wanted at least one person to dress as the Valeyard). Worst of all, our Guest of Honour was waiting for us in the main room, but wouldn't be speaking to us.

Craig's mum had discussed the music for the service ahead of time. Craig was the kind of man who had many times mentioned to his friends the songs he'd want played at his funeral. Mind you, he was also the kind of man who had many times shared his horror stories about work, his thought processes while writing, the minutiae of a pub conversation, his theories of continuity, his opinion about who would win in a Marvel superhero match-off, and many, many dropped hints about his impending birthday. His all-time early-warning record was mentioning one of his forthcoming birthdays to me a full 18 months beforehand. So there was nothing unusual in our knowing what Craig wanted as the soundtrack to his personal departure.

Thus, his mum had some idea of the tunes he wanted. We filed into the crematorium to the sound of strangely familiar music. The IT journalists in the congregation said: 'Oh, it's the *Doctor Who* theme, that's nice; I bet he'd like that.' And the *Doctor Who* fans said: 'Oh, it's Delia Derbyshire's realisation from 1963; he'd be so pleased it isn't the 1987 Keff McCulloch version.' The *Who* opening theme is only quite short, of course, and we were a big congregation, so the funeral director had to play it on a loop until everyone had walked across into the main room. It played once. It played again. It played a third time. We were getting multiple episodes. By the time everyone was seated, it had played seven times, and we agreed that it was probably appropriate for a cremation that it therefore had the same number of episodes as *Inferno*. If only we'd brought eye patches. 'Well, I turned round to him and I told him…' was one of his favourite phrases – sometimes used repeatedly in the same anecdote, so that one got the impression that Craig must have been slowly revolving during the reported conversation, eyepatch or no eyepatch.

A more conventional hymn during the service was based on the Prayer of St Francis, *Make Me a Channel of Your Peace*. Then the leader of the service spoke about Craig's life, his career, his writing, and his many friends.

Finally, we each had the opportunity to place a single flower on his coffin as we

filed out to the final music track. Given that we all knew that Craig had died from a cardiac arrest, it may seem strange that his chosen exit song was Bonnie Tyler's *Total Eclipse of the Heart*. It was one of the tracks that Craig and friends had used for a *Doctor Who* compilation video. And it even starts with the words 'turn around'. Inevitably, therefore, it was hard to know whether to laugh or cry, so we all did a bit of both. On reflection, we should have cranked up the volume to maximum power.

Of course, after the cremation we walked right across the road to the pub for the wake. One of Craig's former editors at Virgin, Rebecca Levene, arrived in time just for the cold collations, politely furious about her intolerably delayed train journey. I reflected how that was exactly the kind of thing that happened to Craig, and how he would have relished recounting it in growing tones of personal outrage to his friends and, indeed, anyone within a fifty metre radius.

And at that point of the wake, just as I thought when I read Russell's letter to *Doctor Who Magazine*, we reflected how Craig would have been very pleased to be the centre of attention; very cross at the thought he needed to be dead for it to happen; and utterly frustrated at his inability to have the final word.

Mark Michalowski

Back in the day, when my first novel, *Relative Dementias*, had just come out, I got a lovely email from Craig. He told me how much he'd enjoyed it, how I'd got the characters down perfectly and how good the story was. To a newbie writer, this was just about the most exciting thing that had happened to me: Craig Hinton – *the* Craig Hinton, a *real* writer, complimenting me! A couple of telephone calls followed in which I realised what a lovely, generous-hearted person Craig was.

Yes, he had his waspish, bitchy side – but unlike many of us, he didn't try to hide it. Throughout the few years that I knew Craig, before his sad and shocking death, he repeatedly fell in and out of love with people around him – usually because, being the person he was, he told things like he saw them. And he had the hugeness of heart to accept when he was wrong, apologise, and move on. He was funny, clever, acerbic, talented, loving, trusting (perhaps too trusting at times) and intensely loyal to those people he considered worthy of his loyalty.

The world – not just that of *Doctor Who* – is a poorer place for his death.

Daniel O'Mahony

I knew Craig Hinton for just over twelve years, but looking back it's hard to imagine a time when he wasn't there. I first met him at a convention in 1994, when I'd just published my first book and so had he, and we were on a signing panel together. I was so nervous my first few signatures turned out as illegible squiggles but Craig's kindness and patience helped me relax. He'd also reviewed that book of mine, far too kindly, and was expecting the author to be an ogre, middle-aged and terribly scarred by experience.

After that, I saw him relatively infrequently and those occasions when we met seemed all the more surprising and valuable to me, even then in a time when I couldn't imagine he'd ever be gone. I found he was always willing to talk during my, usually trivial, personal crises. His own life seemed tumultuous and tragic, but he never begrudged me sharing my own petty worries with him, or resented my own inadequate expressions of sympathy when he was in trouble.

He was an unstintingly generous man, with his time, his company and with all kinds of gossip from behind-the-scenes of the then very tiny world that was *Doctor Who*. The last time I met him he seemed on the verge of breaking out of that world. He was full of good news and expectations for the future. He was happy. That's how I'll remember him.

David Whittam

Craig Hinton was the most infuriating man I ever met. On the one hand, he was the sweetest, funniest and most generous man you would ever want to meet. On the other, I just wanted to pick him up (it would have been difficult, he was a good few inches taller than me and a few stone heavier), give him a good shake and get him to pull himself together.

Ever since I'd known him his life was a series of highs and lows; there was nothing ever in between. I don't think he was capable of living a normal life. Towards the end it seemed like he was finally sorting his life out though, and I was so happy for him . He was so close to being a teacher, a job I can see he would have been fantastic at. It wasn't to be, sadly, and the day I heard he had died there was a kind of tragic inevitability about it.

I still can't believe he's gone really, all this time later. When I go to the Tavern now, I still expect to see him, get the enormous bearhug he always gave me, and hear all the latest gossip – both about *Doctor Who* and about his own life.

I've struggled to write this, as in my mind it's finally saying goodbye to him. There's so much I've wanted to say, most of it wildly inappropriate (which Craig would have loved!) So I'll just settle for this: Craig, I loved you, I miss you and thank you so much for everything.

And, because Craig would have been offended not to be allowed the last word, from a group email posted on September 6th 2006:

Craig Hinton

Bloody anti-depressants. Give you the most amazing dreams…

Monday, I dreamt I came home and the house had been given a complete makeover. New net curtains, flowers everywhere… and it turned out it was Justin Richards.

Last night… The Seeds of Death, but set in Warwick University. With the Second, Third and Fourth Doctors, Jo, Sarah Jane, and the Ice Warriors were worshipping a dead sabretooth tiger. Then the Yeti turned up.

Right, time to book myself into the padded room hotel…

C xxx

"Leave the Quarks out of this, Daniel. I mean it. Back away and don't touch them. I am the God of All Quarks. They survived through ME. And my Giant Wasps."

SHELF LIFE

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DEUS CONTINUITAS GRATUITAE

CRAIG PAUL ALEXANDER HINTON

MAY 7 1964 - DECEMBER 3 2006

SHELF LIFE

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